SKY TRAIL

GRAHAM M. DEAN

Billy Schaffer
from
Mary Agnes
July - 1936.

Sky Trail

by

Graham M. Dean

Tim Murphy, famous young flying reporter of the "Atkinson News," takes off on new adventures in "The Sky Trail." With him is Ralph Graves, his chum and flying companion. A series of daring robberies baffle all investigators and Tim and Ralph, as secret agents of the state police, take the sky trail. They trace the crimes to two members of the Sky Hawk's famous band and the story comes to a sharp and startling climax.

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Tahara—Boy King of the Desert
Tahara—Among African Tribes
Tahara—Boy Mystic of India
Tahara—In the Land of Yucatan

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Chicago

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THE SKY TRAIL

CHAPTER ONE

GRAY clouds of winter hung over the city as the noon edition of the *Atkinson News* roared off the press.

Tim Murphy, famous young flying reporter and aviation editor of the *News*, pecked away half-heartedly at his typewriter trying to write a story about a minor automobile accident that had happened a few minutes before in front of the *News* building.

The raw, damp weather and the lead-colored sky had a depressing effect on Tim. He felt earthbound, restless, and he longed to soar through the clouds in the *Good News*, the trim, fast biplane owned by the paper.

"What are you looking so gloomy about?" asked Ralph Graves, who had been Tim's flying companion on many an aerial adventure.

"This weather is enough to give anyone a grouch," replied Tim. "Here it is, al-

most spring, and we have to get a week of sloppy weather that spoils all our plans. That job of overhauling the *Good News* and installing the new motor will be done today but it won't do us any good. With weather like this we won't get any flying assignments."

"I know just how you feel," sympathized Ralph, "Ive been out chasing the fire trucks on a couple of chimney fires and I've slopped through all the mud and slush I'm going to for one day. Gosh! But I'd like to hop over a few clouds in the *Good News*."

The telephone on Tim's desk rang and he turned to answer. He was smiling when he swung back and faced Ralph.

"Dash off your copy," he said. "Carl Hunter, the manager at the airport, just phoned that the *Good News* is ready for a test flight. If we cut lunch this noon we'll have time for a short hop. What say?"

"Don't ask foolish questions," grinned Ralph. He hurried to his typewriter where his fingers were soon beating a tattoo on flying keys as he wrote the story of the fires.

Ralph finished his story, turned it in at the copy desk, and was on his way to rejoin

Tim when a deep rumble shook the building.

"Earthquake!" shouted one of the copy boys as he dove under a desk.

The windows rattled in their frames and the entire building shook as the terrific noise continued. Then a great pall of black smoke could be seen mounting skyward. The building ceased its trembling, the copy boy scrambled out from under the desk and the telephones voiced their sharp cries.

Tim was the first to answer. From his attitude others in the news room sensed some major disaster. The managing editor, George Carson, human dynamo of the paper, ran to Tim's desk and leaned close to the receiver. He could hear the words which were being shouted into the transmitter at the other end of the line.

The managing editor turned to Ralph.

"Run to the composing room," he cried. "Tell them to stand by for an extra. The storage tanks on the Midwest Oil Company property west of town have caught fire and are exploding."

Ralph waited to hear no more, but ran to the composing room where he gave the managing editor's message to the foreman.

Then he hurried back to the editorial office.

Tim was scribbling a bulletin for the extra with one hand while he listened to the first report of the explosion.

Five or six men were missing. They might have been caught in the first blast or perhaps they had escaped and were too excited to report their safety.

The managing editor took the story as fast as Tim could write it, wrote a new banner line for the front page, and rushed the copy to the composing room.

"Who's talking?" he asked.

"One of the mechanics from the airport," said Tim. "The storage tanks are only a mile and a half from the field and he saw the first one let go. A man from the oil company is at the field now and they are getting the story from him."

"Is the *Good News* in condition to fly?" asked the managing editor.

"Just got word a few minutes ago she was ready to test," replied Tim.

"Is it safe to go up on a picture assignment for photos of those burning oil tanks?"

"If you'll pay for all the paint I scorch off the plane," said Tim.

"We'll pay for it," cried Carson. "Take Ralph with you and get all the pictures you can. We'll want them for the city final. And whatever you do, don't let your motor cut out when you're over those burning tanks."

"If it does you'll have to look for two new reporters," chuckled Ralph.

Tim turned the telephone over to another reporter and they stopped only long enough to get a camera and make sure that it had a plentiful supply of plates.

The editorial office was in an uproar. Carson was shouting orders at everyone who came within hearing distance; reporters were running from the room, starting for the scene of the explosion; others were hastening to hospitals where injured might have been taken and one was delving into the files to compare the present disaster with fires of other years.

A heavy pall of oily, black smoke blanketed the city and some streets were so dark the street lights had been turned on.

Tim and Ralph ran to the nearby garage where the cars used by *News* Reporters were stored. They took the first machine available, a light, speedy roadster. Tim

climbed behind the wheel and they shot out of the garage. Traffic down town was in a tangled jam that would take an hour to clear for the rumbling explosions from the oil tanks had alarmed the entire city. Many people, believing that the city was about to fall on their heads, had hurried to their cars in an attempt to flee to the open country. Now they were just as anxious to return to their homes.

By sliding through alleys, Tim managed to get to a fairly clear boulevard that led to the airport. A light breeze had started to clear the smoke from the air and Tim stepped on the accelerator. The indicator on the speedometer climbed steadily—forty, forty-five and fifty miles an hour.

"Look out," cried Ralph, "Or we'll be picked up for speeding."

"No chance," replied Tim. "All the police are at the fire. We've got to make time if we want good pictures."

Tim and Ralph were supremely happy as they sped toward the airport. They were going into the clouds again—into the clouds in quest of the news and the pictures. Barely a year before the *News* had purchased an airplane and Tim had been as-

signed the duties of flying reporter. Ralph had been selected to help and Tim had trained his friend as a flyer. Together they had uncovered some of the biggest stories of the year for the *News* and their exploits had become exceedingly popular with the people of Atkinson.

In their first year of following the sky trails they had flown across the top of the world to prove that the ice and snow of the Arctic did not cover a hitherto unknown continent; Tim had flown down into Old Mexico and secured exclusive photographs of a rebel leader; and together they had brought about the death of the Sky Hawk, a former German war ace who had preyed on the air lines of the middle west.

Now they were off on a new adventure and their hearts beat faster as they neared the airport.

To their right great billows of smoke mounted skyward from the burning storage tanks and occasionally tongues of flame could be seen as the fire made some new conquest.

The airport was just beyond the city limits and its administration building and hangars flanked the boulevard. Tim spun

the roadster through the gate and stopped beside hanger No. 5.

The broad doors of the hangar had been rolled open and the *Good News*, its nose pointed toward the field, was waiting for them.

The metal propeller was turning slowly as the engine idled. The fuselage had been painted a brilliant crimson with the wings a contrast in silver grey.

Carl Hunter, quiet, efficient manager of the field, was waiting for them.

"How does the new engine sound?" asked Tim.

"Mighty sweet," replied Hunter. "I haven't had her up for I knew you would want the first flight. However, I gave her a thorough test on the blocks and she never missed a stroke. Boy, you've got some plane with that new 250 horsepower radial motor. You'll do 200 miles an hour and have plenty of power to spare."

They hastened to the plane where Tim and Ralph made a quick but thorough inspection. The biplane had been overhauled and re-rigged during the winter with a new, more powerful motor. The *Good News* would be fifty miles an hour faster.

The flying reporters climbed into their cockpits. Ralph, who was to handle the camera, took the forward cockpit and Tim handled the controls in the rear one.

Tim opened the throttle and listened attentively as he ran the motor up and down the scale. There was never a second's hesitation.

Hunter came close and shouted in Tim's ear.

"Don't get too close to the fire," he cried. "The heat will raise the dickens with the air and it will be pretty rocky."

Tim nodded and motioned for the blocks to be cleared away.

The *Good News* rolled easily out of the hangar, flipped its tail saucily at the few mechanics left at the field, and roared over the soggy ground and into the air.

Tim thrilled to the touch of the controls and the *Good News* answered even to the slightest movement of the stick.

The new motor settled to its work in a manner that warmed Tim's heart. He felt that he had reserve power for any emergency as he swung the biplane around and headed for the burning oil tanks.

Tim put the *Good News* in a steady

climb and they gained altitude rapidly. At 1,200 feet he levelled off and Ralph got busy with the camera.

The oil storage lot, a large tract of level land, was dotted with a dozen large tanks. Five of the tanks had caught fire and exploded, the force of the explosion knocking off the steel tops. These tops, like great black pancakes, had been blown clear of the tract. One of them had hurtled down to crush the roof of the house nearest the fire.

The walls of two of the tanks had given way and Tim and Ralph could see the firemen fighting desperately to stop the spread of the flames. Safety trenches had been a part of the protective system at the tank farm, but some of them had been weakened by the explosion and the flaming gasoline was finding the vulnerable spots.

Tim swung the *Good News* over the blazing storage tanks and even 1,200 feet in the air they could feel the heat. The plane danced crazily and Ralph, who had been leaning far out, clutched the side of the plane and shook his fist at Tim.

The flying reporter snapped off the throttle and they glided down on a gentle

incline, as the propeller turned slowly.

"Got enough pictures?" yelled Tim.

"Three more plates left," shouted Ralph. "Let's go down where I can get some close ups. Make a run for the fire at about four hundred feet; then zoom up just before we get there. That will give us some real pictures."

"Also scorch all the new paint off the ship," protested Tim.

"Carson said he'd pay for a new coat," Ralph reminded him and Tim nodded and snapped on the switches again. The motor roared into action and they shot down out of the murky sky.

At four hundred feet Tim pulled back on the stick and the *Good News* levelled off. They were a mile west of the burning tank farm when he banked sharply and swung back toward the city.

The clouds of smoke, rolling upward, were streaked with vivid flashes of flame. Tim chilled as he thought of the fate that would be theirs if their plane failed to respond to the controls. He forced the thought from his mind and took a fresh grip on the stick.

Ralph glanced back and smiled. Tim

motioned to his own safety belt and directed Ralph to strap himself into the plane. No telling what might happen in the next smoky-flame seared seconds.

Tim pushed the *Good News* into several tight banks while Ralph strapped himself into the plane. Then they were ready for their picture making dash.

Ralph trained his camera and glued his eyes to the sight. It would be a great action picture, awe inspiring in its power, if they could get it.

Tim, one hand on the stick and the other on the throttle, watched his air speed. It was increasing rapidly. Half a mile from the burning tanks they were going one hundred and fifty miles an hour. A quarter of a mile away and their speed had increased to one hundred and seventy-five. Then there was no more time to check the air speed. They were going fast enough and Tim knew his motor had plenty of reserve power for any emergency.

Ralph, in the forward cockpit, was busy with his camera. Two exposures of the rolling mass of smoke and flame were made in the split seconds before Tim threw the *Good News* into a steep zoom.

The towering pillar of smoke was less than five hundred feet ahead of their propeller when Tim put the pressure on the stick. The nose shot skyward and the *Good News* danced upward along the outer rim of smoke.

Ralph was ready for the final exposure when a terrific explosion and a wave of rag flame and heat tore the heavens asunder. The *Good News* leaped upward, bucking like a wild horse. Tim, his eyebrows singed and lungs burning from the scorching heat, fought the controls.

Up, up, up pitched the *Good News*, tossing wildly on the edge of the inferno of flame and smoke. The noise of the explosion had deadened their ears and neither Ralph nor Tim could hear the laboring of the motor as Tim gave it full throttle.

The new paint on the wings and fuselage curled and darkened in the heat and for a second Tim thought the gasoline tank might explode.

Then above it all came the sound of a second explosion and the *Good News* stood up on its tail. Tim was thankful that they had used their safety belts for he was almost thrown from the cockpit.

Out of the smoke hurtled a great piece of steel. Tim heard Ralph scream a warning but he was powerless. The *Good News* was out of control.

Fascinated by the sight of the great projectile which was approaching them with terrifying speed, Tim lived an eternity. Actually it might have been a second, probably it was less.

The *Good News*, falling tail downward, missed the deadly piece of steel by less than two feet.

They were past one danger only to be confronted with another even more horrible to contemplate than the one they had just escaped. Ralph, his eyes burning in his smoke-blackened face, was looking back at Tim, trusting that the young flyer would be able to pull the *Good News* out of the tailspin.

With a last despairing effort Tim crashed his fist against the throttle. It leaped ahead a good inch. It had jammed in the emergency and he had not noticed it. More fuel flooded into the laboring cylinders and the motor, its full power unlashed, lifted them almost vertically into the sky.

When they were out of danger and in the cool, clean air, Tim brought the nose of the plane down and they headed for the airport.

The *Good News* looked to be ready to take first prize at a fire sale. The entire ship was grimy from the heavy oil smoke and the dope on the wings and fuselage was curled and cracked from the terrific heat.

Tim nosed down over the airport and idled his motor as they skimmed to a perfect three point landing and rolled to a stop in front of their hangar.

Carl Hunter ran to their plane.

"You crazy news hounds," he cried. "I thought you were goners when those explosions caught you. How did you ever get out alive?"

"We'll thank the new motor for saving our necks," replied Tim. "We were in trouble, believe me. The throttle stuck and the engine wasn't getting all the gas. In a moment of desperation I smashed the throttle with my fist and opened it. A second later and we were climbing to safety."

"Good thing you made me strap myself in," grinned Ralph, "Or you would have

lost your passenger when we took that wild west ride."

"We were mighty lucky to get back," said Tim. "Next time we cover a fire on an oil tank farm we'll know enough to stay at a safe distance."

"But think of the great action pictures we've got," said Ralph.

"I'm thinking of my own neck right now," replied Tim. "When the second explosion came and that piece of steel picked us out for a target I just said good-bye to everything. While we're passing around the thanks for getting out alive we'll have to include old lady gravity. The *Good News* was dropping earthward just fast enough for us to escape."

"We'd better get these pictures to the office so they can use them in the final," said Ralph.

"You take the camera and the car and go on," said Tim. "I won't be needed at the office for a while and I want to check over the plane and see if it suffered any serious damage. Tell Carson he'll have to okay an order for another coat of paint."

"I'll wait and see how the pictures come out before I tell him," chuckled Ralph as

he got in the roadster and started for the office.

Tim and Hunter went over the *Good News* carefully, checking every joint and strut. Then they gave the motor a thorough test. It was sweet and true.

"A real plane," was the field manager's comment when they had completed their inspection. "After a test like the one today you can count on it carrying you thorough anything short of a hurricane."

"I'm not so sure it wouldn't do that," said Tim.

"We'd better fill up the gasoline tank," he added. "Never can tell when we may get an assignment that will call for another quick getaway."

They refueled the ship and were rolling it back into the hangar when a car skidded through the gate. The managing editor and Ralph were in the machine and from their haste Tim knew that he would soon be in the clouds again on the trail of another big story.

CHAPTER TWO

THE managing editor of the *News* jumped from the car before Ralph brought it to a stop and ran toward Tim.

"Can you start on another assignment right away?" he asked.

"Whenever you say, Mr. Carson," replied Tim. "We've just made a complete check and the *Good News* isn't hurt in the least. She's refueled and ready to go."

"Then you're heading for Cedar river valley," said the managing editor. "Here's the situation. The village of Auburn you took food and medical supplies to last spring when the Cedar was on a rampage is in need of help again. The river is causing trouble and the worst ice jam in the history of the country is just above the village. This changeable weather has kept the river thawing and then freezing and thousands of tons of ice are piling up behind the jam. I want you and Ralph to make a trip there this afternoon, survey the situation, get all the pictures you can, and report to me. When we know the size of

the jam we can plan to get relief to them."

"We'll be on our way in ten minutes," promised Tim. "The people at Auburn helped me when I was working on the Sky Hawk mystery and I'll be glad of the chance to do another favor for them."

"In the excitement of this new story," said the managing editor, "I almost forgot to tell you how much I appreciate your fine work in getting the pictures of the fire at the oil tanks. I've never seen anything like them for action. They were so good we put out an extra with nothing but pictures on the front page. Biggest selling extra ever published in Atkinson."

"They may prove fairly expensive by the time you pay the cost of a new coat of paint for the *Good News*," said Tim.

"Hang the cost of the paint," exclaimed the managing editor, "Those pictures were worth $500 to the paper. Why the one showing that piece of steel hurtling up out of the smoke and flame is the best action picture ever taken."

"The what!" said Tim.

"The picture showing that piece of steel coming toward you," repeated Carson.

"I'll explain," said Ralph, and he turned

to Tim. "We had a lucky break," he continued. "When that explosion caught us I had only one plate left in the camera. In the excitement I snapped the shutter and it so happened that the camera was aimed to get that steel plate that almost wrote 'finish' for us."

"We'll be able to sell that picture all over the country," said the managing editor, "And I'll see that you boys get half of whatever the paper makes on it."

Carl Hunter came out of the administration building to report that the weather in the direction of Cedar Valley was fair.

"Better get into some heavier clothes," he warned, "For it will be pretty breezy up there if Tim decides to step on the gas."

"Our winter flying outfits are all in town," said Ralph. "Guess we can make it this way."

"I've got some spare clothes," suggested Hunter. "Some of them belong to 'Tiny' Lewis but they'll keep you warm at least."

The young reporters laughed at the thought of wearing "Tiny" Lewis' flying togs. "Tiny," was the exact opposite from his name. He was as round as a barrel and not much over five feet six in height.

The boys followed Hunter back to the administration building and made their way to the pilots' room. Hunter opened several lockers and finally found the clothes he sought, heavy fleece-lined coveralls especially designed for cold weather flying.

When the boys had donned their ill-fitting clothes they looked like a pair of aerial scare crows for their legs projected awkwardly from the suits, which were far too short for them.

"Throw a couple of robes over your legs and you'll be all right," suggested the field manager.

"Not for me," grinned Tim. "Ralph can bundle up all he wants to but I'm not going to have a blanket tangled around the stick just about the time I have to get into action."

When the boys returned to No. 5 hangar the mechanics had the *Good News* warmed up and on the line.

The managing editor looked at his watch.

"Just a few minutes after one-thirty," he said, half to himself, half to his star reporters. Then aloud he said, "You won't be able to get to Auburn, snap your pictures

and get back here in time for the city final. However, if you get some good shots we'll put out a five o'clock picture extra so step on it all the way."

"We'll be back in less than two hours," promised Tim. "Wouldn't be able to do it with the old motor in the ship, but with this new power unit we'll do 180 an hour steady over and back. The trip is about 125 miles each way and with the time it takes for the pictures we'll make it in two hours easy."

"Then I'll have the engravers and the composing room stand by for a five o'clock picture extra," said the managing editor. "This will be a red-letter day in the history of the *News*—two picture extras in the same day and believe me, boys, that's what the readers want. Pictures, action, and more pictures. Now get going."

Ralph lifted his big camera into the front cockpit and settled himself for the trip. He wrapped a heavy robe around his legs for he knew Tim was going to tear loose on the trip to Auburn and even though it was moderately warm on the ground the air at two thousand feet would be chilly.

Tim checked his instruments, waved for

the mechanics to get in the clear, and opened his throttle.

The *Good News* lifted her tail off the muddy field, splattered the water out of half a dozen puddles, and then shot up into her own domain.

The new radial motor, tested in flame and smoke little more than an hour before, leaped to its task and they sped away into the east. Behind them the fire still raged at the oil tanks, but firemen appeared to have checked its spread.

Tim pushed the throttle steadily forward until the air speed indicator registered 175 miles an hour. At 2,000 feet the ground was a dull, gray checkerboard beneath them. In places there were splotches of dirty snow, a last vestige of winter. Creeks, silver ribbons winding through the countryside, were running bankfull of water. Several times they sighted streams in which the outgoing ice had jammed around some bridge or sharp curve. Behind these jams the stream had spread out until it formed a small lake. None of them were of major importance but at one bridge half a dozen men were busy trying to dynamite the mass of ice which was

threatening the safety of the structure.

As they neared the valley of the mighty Cedar the country became rougher and there were fewer fields for an emergency landing. A plane in trouble in the valley would have small chance of making a safe descent.

They were fifteen miles from Auburn when they caught their first glimpse of the river, a great lake stretching for miles up its valley.

Then they saw the jumbled mass of ice above the village. The towering blocks had jammed at a sharp bend in the river and hundreds of tons of ice, born by the spring freshets, had built a great dam which was impounding the waters of the river.

The bed of the stream below the ice jam carried little more than a trickle of water when compared to the usual volume.

From the position of the jam Tim could see that unless the pressure was relieved soon the water behind the ice, spreading out over the valley, would soon creep around the wings of the jam and sweep down on the village.

The *Good News* slid down out of the

clouds and swung over the scene of the impending disaster. The village was practically deserted. Men and women were at the jam, working side by side in what appeared a futile effort to start the thousands of tons of ice moving down stream before their own homes were destroyed.

Tim guided the *Good News* up the valley, over the jam, and on up stream. The jam of ice extended nearly a half mile above the village. The river above that point, running free, was piling more ice on the jam, adding to the pressure which hourly threatened to let go and sweep everything before it.

Ralph, leaning far over the side of the plane, was busy with his camera. He motioned for Tim to return to the village. There they took pictures of the practically deserted town and Tim dropped low enough for Ralph to get some good flashes of the men and women working along the edge of the ice jam.

Just a year before the villagers had helped Tim when he was on the trail of the Sky Hawk and he felt that he owed them a real debt.

They gazed upward as the plane sped

over them but they did not recognize the scorched, blackened plane as the *Good News*. Tim and Ralph waved eagerly, but there was no reply. The villagers were weighted down with despair.

Ralph indicated that he had used the last of the plates in the camera and Tim swung the *Good News* into the west. He headed back for Atkinson at 180 miles an hour, the motor singing as they shot through the greying sky.

The clouds were dropping on them and by the time they were half way to Atkinson they had a ceiling of less than six hundred feet. Tim tried to rise above the clouds, but they were massed solidly. He climbed to the five thousand foot level only to find himself lost in swirling vapor and with the air growing colder every minute.

Ice started to form on the wings of the *Good News* and Tim realized the danger. The plane was harder to handle, slower to answer the controls.

Ralph sensed the danger of the higher altitude and motioned for Tim to dive, but the flying reporter shook his head. He was too experienced an airman for a power dive when ice was gathering on his ship.

To have nosed the ship down at 180 miles an hour might be fatal for both of them. With the ceiling probably down to nothing they would flash out of the clouds at high speed with only a few hundred feet of clearance. Normally they could get away with it but with the wings weighted down with ice one of them might snap off when he pulled back on the stick. It was too dangerous to risk. He decided to take his time, come down gradually, and fight the ice as best he could.

The next ten minutes were an hour to Tim as he eased the *Good News* toward the ground. Little by little they lost altitude. The ship was loggy now with its burden of ice but he managed to keep it out of a dive and they finally levelled off at two hundred feet. Even at that low altitude the clouds were brushing their wings but the air was warmer and the ice gradually disappeared from the wings.

For a few minutes Tim had been too busy with his own troubles to think about those of the villagers back at Auburn, but the danger of the ice past his mind returned to them.

It had been plain to him that unless

something was done in the next few hours the massed ice would give way and march down the valley, sweeping everything before it. As towns went Auburn wasn't much to brag about, but its people were friendly and the village was home to them. Tim, an orphan, knew what it meant to be without a home and he resolved to do everything within his means to help the villagers.

They roared over the suburbs of Atkinson, sped across the heart of the city, and skidded over the ground to roll to a stop in front of their own hangar.

The managing editor was waiting for them.

"Get the pictures O. K.?" he cried.

"Camera full of the best ice photos you ever saw," grinned Ralph as he eased his cramped legs over the side of the plane and dropped to the muddy ground.

"How is the situation in the valley?" asked the managing editor.

"Critical," replied Tim as he shut off his engine. "I never saw so much ice in my life. The jam is at a sharp bend in the river just above the village. Thousands and thousands of tons of ice has piled up

there and the river is bringing down more every hour. The flow of water below the jam is practically shut off and it's spreading out above the ice. By tomorrow morning the whole thing will let go and that will be the end of the village."

"What are the people doing?" Carl Hunter wanted to know.

"Everything they can do," said Ralph. "All the men and women are out at the jam, working side by side. I saw them plant several charges of dynamite and they might just as well have been five inch firecrackers for all the good it did. There isn't enough dynamite in this part of the state to move that jam. They couldn't get it planted in time."

"I wish we could do something to help them," said the managing editor thoughtfully.

"If you really want to save the village," said Tim, "I think I've got a plan that will work. Listen."

In a few words he outlined his plan. The managing editor listened thoughtfully.

"Sounds like it is the only chance of saving them, but you'll be running a mighty big risk, Tim."

"I'm willing to take the chance if you'll let me have the *Good News*. I'll have to cover nearly a thousand miles before I can really start work."

"The *Good News* and anything else you need is yours," promised the managing editor.

"Then I'll get ready and start at once," said Tim.

"Count me in," added Ralph.

"Not in this first trip," said Tim. "I've got to fly fast and far and the less weight the faster I'll go. When I'm ready to start for Auburn again I'll need you. In the meantime you see that we have at least a dozen flares ready to take with us for it will be midnight or later by the time we reach the valley again."

Ralph promised to have the parachute flares ready and then followed the managing editor to one of the *New's* cars. An extra was being held up for the pictures in Ralph's camera and after all his duty was to the paper first.

Tim turned the *Good News* over to the Mechanics for refueling and went over to Hunter's office to get warm and map out the course of his next flight.

The field manager unfurled a roll of maps and helped Tim check his plans.

"You're going to get plenty of hours in the air today," he grinned.

"I know it," smiled Tim, "And only a little more than three hours ago I was grumbling because there wasn't more chance for any flying assignments this week.

Tim took a ruler and laid out his course, an air line from Atkinson to Fort Armstrong, the nearest army post. It was a good five hundred miles and with certain weather ahead Tim knew that he would have to count on three hours for the flight. He should be at the army post by seven o'clock. If he allowed himself one hour at the post he ought to be able to start back around 8 o'clock. Three more hours and he would be back in Atkinson at 11 o'clock. A stop to pick up Ralph, make final arrangements and then into the air again for Cedar river valley.

Every minute counted and after carefully checking his course Tim hurried back to his plane.

"Aren't you going to telephone the Fort you're coming?" asked the field manager.

"Carson promised to do that," replied Tim. "I'll need his political pull to get the material I need at the Fort. You phone Carson when I take off. Have him tell the army people I'll drop in on them about 7 o'clock, wind and weather allowing."

"You'll make it all right, Tim," said Carson, "But look out for ice if you go too high."

"I had a taste of that coming back from the valley," said the flying reporter. "No more of that for me if I can help myself."

Enough gas for a four hour flight had been placed in the tanks of the *Good News*.

The engine, still warm, caught on the first turn and roared into action.

Tim adjusted the pack parachute Carson had brought from the office, settled himself on his seat, and motioned "all clear."

Water and mud sprayed from the wheels as the *Good News* picked up speed. Then it lifted off the heavy field, shook itself free of the mud, and climbed the low-hanging clouds.

The ceiling was less than five hundred and by this time the afternoon was grey and a sharp breeze was zipping down out of the north. It would be a nasty night for fly-

ing over an unmarked and unlighted course.

Tim followed the air mail trail for half an hour and then turned to his left. Fort Armstrong was now almost straight south on an air line. With prairie country the flight would have been easy but Tim knew that 200 miles out of Atkinson he would run into the Flint hills, a branch of the Great Smoky Mountains which wandered out into the prairie at a most inconvenient angle. If the ceiling was low over the Flint hills, he would be in for a nasty half hour of flying.

The first hour slid away as Tim roared southward at nearly 200 miles an hour. The thunder of his motor roused prairie villages from their winter lethargy and stampeded cattle on lonely farms. Occasionally some farmer, surprised at his chores, shook his fist angrily as Tim sailed over the chimney tops.

The ceiling was still six hundred when Tim sighted the first low ridge of hills that marked the Flint range. He had flown over the territory only once before and that time when he was returning the year before from Old Mexico with exclusive pictures of a rebel leader.

The hills were really ridges of rock, rearing their sharp, bleak heads into the air—a trap for any unwary flyer. To crash on those inhospitable crags would have meant the end for plane and pilot.

Tim lifted the *Good News* until his wing tips were brushing the massed clouds. Six hundred and fifty was the highest he could go without burying himself in the clouds and flying blind, something which he did not relish.

Tim throttled down to half speed as he reached the first ridge of the Flint hills. He cleared the tops of the crags by two hundred feet and was congratulating himself when another ridge loomed ahead of his spinning prop. The second one bulked higher and beyond he could see a third which buried its head in the low-hanging clouds.

Tim slid over the second ridge and then swung sharply to the right. Perhaps he would find a gap in the third ridge which would let him through. For five minutes he sped along, hunting for some opening that would let him through. He was almost ready to make a blind attempt through the clouds when he caught sight of a break

in the hills. It was not more than 200 feet wide but Tim took the chance, banked the *Good News* sharply, and dove for the opening.

The hills closed in on him and dismal masses of rock on each side waited for him to crash. But he slid through the narrow break and found himself again over the prairie, the hills in the background.

The rest of the trip to Fort Armstrong was easy going compared with the task of getting through the hills and Tim sighted the lights of the army post at five minutes to seven.

Markers on the landing field flashed on when guards heard the sound of his motor and mechanics were waiting to guide his ship into a hangar when he landed and taxied up the runway.

Tim's body ached from the cold and his legs were stiff and cramped. A mechanic reached up and gave him a hand as he clambered out of the cockpit.

An officer with a captain's bars on his shoulder, strode into the hangar.

"We were expecting you, Murphy," he said. "Your managing editor telephoned that you were on your way and we've tried

to have everything ready for you. How did you find the Flint hills?

"They gave me the shivers for half an hour," admitted Tim, "But I managed to find a gap in the third ridge and got through without burying myself in the clouds."

"You were lucky," commented the army man who introduced himself as Captain John Nugent, in command of the air force at Fort Armstrong.

"Better come over to my quarters and get warm and have a snack to eat," suggested the army man.

Tim readily agreed for he was chilled to the bone and hungry.

"I know you're anxious to start back," said Captain Nugent, "But you'll be more alert if you rest a few minutes and fill up with some hot food. I've had my boy keep things hot for you."

"That's mighty nice of you," said Tim, "And I expect I'll save time in the end if I take a few minutes rest here."

When they reached the captain's quarters, the army man insisted that Tim take off his things and enjoy a good meal.

"Have you planned your trip back?" he asked.

"Looks like I'll have to try the Flint hills in the dark," said Tim. "I've got to be in Atkinson before midnight if my plan to help the people at Auburn is going to work. I'm sure that ice jam will go before morning and if it does it's goodbye to that town."

"If anything goes wrong with your ship in the hills with the load you'll be carrying, it will be curtains for you," said the army man.

"I haven't had time to think about that," confessed Tim. "As far as I can see it is the only way to get back in time. I'll have to bore up into the clouds and take a chance."

"Columbus took a chance and was lucky," said Captain Nugent. "However, you're not Columbus and you've had just about your share of luck for one day. Don't tempt fate too much."

"I won't deliberately tempt fate," said Tim, "But time counts tonight."

"Would half an hour make a great deal of difference?"

"It might," replied the flying reporter. "Half an hour isn't long when it comes to considering your own life."

"But I must think of the people of Auburn."

"If you crash in the Flint hills it won't help them."

"True enough. But what else can I do?"

"Go around the hills."

"That would take too much time."

"Not more than an extra half hour," countered the army man. "Look at this map."

They bent over the map on the table and the army officer pointed out what he considered Tim's best route for the return flight to Atkinson.

"You'll have to swing to the east of the hills," he said, "But your flight will be over level country and you'll have a chance if anything goes wrong."

"I believe you're right," agreed Tim. "The last thing I'm looking for tonight is a crack-up."

An orderly came in to announce that Tim's plane was ready for the return trip.

Captain Nugent put on a heavy coat and accompanied Tim to the runway. The *Good News*, outlined in the field's floodlights, was waiting for Tim, motor idling.

Captain Nugent climbed up to the forward cockpit and made a thorough inspection of the contents. Satisfied that everything was ship-shape, he dropped back to the ground.

"You've got an even dozen demolition bombs," he told Tim. "The men didn't have time to rig a bomb rack on your plane but they did the next best thing. They put the 'eggs' in a hammock that will carry them without danger unless you happen to crack-up."

"Pleasant prospect," smiled Tim.

"But I don't think you'll have any trouble if you swing out around the Flint hills," said the army officer.

"Say, what the dickens have you been doing to this plane?" he demanded as he noticed for the first time, the smoke-blackened condition of the wings.

Tim explained what had taken place earlier in the day and the army officer whistled as the flying reporter told how they had been caught by the explosion of the oil tanks.

"If you've had a narrow escape like that today," said Captain Nugent, "I guess flying the hills at night won't bother you."

"I've decided not to risk it," said Tim. "I'm going to go around."

"The air is getting sharper," said the army man. "Sure you've got warm enough clothes? We'll be glad to lend you some extra togs if there is anything you need."

"Thanks a lot," said Tim. "You've been mighty good to let me have these high explosive bombs. I won't need anything more and now I think I'd better get under way."

Tim climbed into the rear cockpit, tested the motor, and after waving farewell to Captain Nugent, sent the *Good News* skimming down the lighted runway.

The motor barked lustily as the plane gained altitude, the lights of the Fort Armstrong were soon lost in the night.

Tim followed the course Captain Nugent had helped him lay out. For more than an hour he sped over the right-of-way of the Southwestern Railroad. Mile after mile he was guided by the dim streaks of steel which were barely discernible in the darkness.

The railroad skimmed the east end of the Flint hills and when the lights of Macon showed in the distance Tim knew

he was around the worst barrier. The dreaded hills now lay to his left and behind.

He glanced at his watch. He was making good time. With no unforeseen emergencies he would be in Atkinson by eleven.

The sky had lightened somewhat and Tim now had a ceiling of 1,000 feet. With a greater margin of safety, he opened the throttle wide and the *Good News* bored into the night.

In the dim light of the instrument board Tim could see the needle on the air speed indicator hovering near the 200-mile an hour mark. He was making more than three miles a minute. That was time! It was faster than Tim had ever traveled.

Then the indicator crept on up. Two hundred and five and then it wavered at two hundred and ten. The motor was not turning over any faster than a minute or two before so Tim knew he must have picked up a good tail wind.

Let'er go! The sooner he reached Atkinson the sooner he would be on the last lap of his trip to Auburn and the nearer the completion of his plans for the salvation of the village. On he roared through the night and the lights of small towns were

little more than blurs in a magic carpet.

Far ahead the lights of Atkinson reflected against the clouds and four minutes later Tim was throttling down the motor preparatory to gliding into the airport.

For the first time since leaving Fort Armstrong the load of high explosive bombs which he had obtained at the army post worried him.

Supposing he struck a mud puddle and nosed over? One blinding, shattering blast and it would be all over. So much depended on the success of his landing that he dared not think of failure.

The flood lights came on and bathed the field in a chilling blue brilliance. Tim cut his motor and sidled down, killing speed every second. He glanced at his watch. Ten fifty-five; five minutes to the good.

He was less than two hundred feet above the field when the deafening roar of an incoming tri-motored passenger and express plane drowned the sound of his own motor. Tim looked up and froze at his controls. The tri-motor was coming in from the left, and their paths would cross in less than 300 feet.

CHAPTER THREE

TIM could see lights gleaming from the windows of the tri-motor. It was the westbound transcontinental more than an hour late and its pilots were bringing it in fast in an attempt to make up every minute possible.

The distance between the planes narrowed rapidly. The *Good News* had almost lost flying speed, was drifting in, when Tim first sighted the tri-motor and he was powerless to chance his course.

He jammed the throttle open and the motor coughed as the raw fuel leaped into the white-hot cylinders. There was only one chance; that he could get up enough speed to throw the *Good News* into a nose dive. He could avoid the tri-motor that way but his own chances of coming out of the dive would be slim.

In that split second Tim made his decision. He would attempt the dive. There were probably women and children on the tri-motor for the night plane usually carried a heavy passenger list. If the two

planes met they would all be blown to eternity.

The *Good News* picked up momentum again and Tim shoved the nose down. Just as he pushed the stick ahead he heard the engines of the tri-motor quicken their stride. Evidently the pilots of the big ship had seen him and were making a desperate effort to avert the collision. Tim hoped they would have enough sense to climb.

The *Good News* quivered under the sudden strain of the maneuver and Tim saw the ground race up to meet him.

The undercarriage of the tri-motor almost brushed the upper wing of the *Good News*. Then the planes were clear but the *Good News* was diving toward the field.

Tim had only one hope. He pulled back on the stick and closed his eyes. He could feel the ship falling, then the pitch of the descent lessened. He opened his eyes. The *Good News* was skimming along the field with its wheels less than five feet from the ground.

Tim looked up for the tri-motor. It was circling, waiting for him to land.

The flying reporter lifted the *Good News* up again for he was going too fast to

attempt a landing. He swung around and then dropped down on the field, checking his speed with a delicate hand lest he bump hard enough to set off the "eggs" cradled in the forward cockpit.

The *Good News* rolled to a stop in front of its hangar.

Carson, Hunter, Ralph and a group of mechanics were waiting for Tim. They were white and shaky for they had seen how death had ridden on the wings of the two incoming planes only a minute before. "Tim, Tim," cried Ralph in a choked voice, "I thought you were a goner."

"So did I," admitted Tim, and for once he found it hard to smile.

"I'll report those flying yahoos," stormed the usually mild-mannered Hunter. "They'll be grounded for thirty days for pulling a reckless landing like that. You had the right of way and they attempted to cut in on you. Here they come now."

The tri-motor had come to a stop on the concrete apron in front of the administration building and its pilots sprinted toward the No. 5 hangar.

They were red-faced and shaking with anger.

"What's the idea?" stormed the first one as he addressed Tim. "You crazy, flying fool, you almost wrecked us. I've a good notion to beat up on you."

"Shut up!" The words whipped through the night and the angry pilot turned to face the field manager.

"But this nut almost wrecked us," he protested as he pointed at Tim.

"Shut up!" cried Hunter and he almost choked with rage, "if anybody here is going to get a licking you're one of them. You cut in on Murphy. We had given him the right-of-way and you barged down and almost ran him into the ground. As it happens he was on special duty tonight, flying in here from Fort Armstrong. You may have something to explain to Uncle Sam and the least you'll hear about this will be thirty days on the ground without pay."

"You can't get away with that," protested the second flyer. "Why this kid was trying to beat us in."

"I'll get away with it and I may have your skins to boot," promised Carson. "You're so all-fired smart, suppose you step over here and take a look at the load Murphy is carrying tonight."

The pilots of the big transport followed Hunter to the *Good News* where they peered into the forward cockpit.

"Bombs!" exclaimed one.

"We'd have been blown to pieces if we had met in the air," gasped the other.

"Which is just exactly the reason Murphy took such a desperate chance to avoid hitting you," exclaimed Hunter. "Do you still want to beat up on him?"

"Not on your life," said the transport pilots and they turned to Tim to offer their apologies.

"We are lucky to be here," said Tim as the tri-motor men stammered their appreciation.

Ralph, who had gained control of his emotions, busied himself loading a dozen parachute flares into the forward cockpit.

By 11:15 the *Good News* had been refueled for the flight to Auburn.

"What are the latest reports?" asked Tim.

"The ice is piling up every hour," said the managing editor. "People in the village have started to move their belongings and they expect the town will be swept away before morning."

"Have they been warned to watch for us and get in the clear when we start dropping the bombs?"

"Everyone has been ordered to be in the clear by midnight. Before they leave they will build large fires along the bank of the river to guide you."

"That's a good idea," said Tim.

"All set," he called to Ralph, who had taken his place in the forward cockpit, squeezed in between high explosive bombs and parachute flares.

"All ready," replied Ralph. "Only take it easy. I don't want to be part of another explosion today."

"Don't worry," said Tim. "I'll handle the ship like we were carrying a basket of Easter eggs."

Tim settled himself for the flight to Auburn and a minute later the *Good News* was winging its way into the east.

The safety of the village depended on the success of their efforts within the next hour and Tim and Ralph realized the seriousnes of their mission.

They sped into the night at a chilling pace and both reporters welcomed the signal fires which marked the course of the

river. It was just before midnight when they swung down out of the sky to reconnoiter the ice jam.

Ralph dropped a parachute flare which lighted the country-side for half a mile around.

There was no one in the vicinity of the jam and the village had been deserted.

Tim inspected the face of the jam closely, hunting for the key point where the pressure was greatest. Up and down the river they cruised while Ralph lighted three more flares.

Finally Tim was satisfied that he had picked out the vulnerable spots in the jam and he motioned for Ralph to get ready with the bombs.

By pre-arranged signal Ralph was to drop a bomb over board everytime Tim raised his left arm. Several of the flares had dropped on the ice and there was plenty of light.

Tim's arm jerked upward and a small, black object hurtled down from the plane.

The night was torn by a blinding flash followed by an ear-shattering roar. A geyser of ice and water mounted upward from the point where the bomb had struck.

"Score one," cried Ralph as he prepared another bomb.

Tim nodded grimly. The explosion had been spectacular but he wondered how much it had weakened the jam.

Ralph dropped two more parachute flares and before their light had faded they had time to plant four bombs. More flares and more bombs. They honeycombed the face of the jam with the high-explosive missiles and above the sound of their own plane they could hear the angry grumble of the river as the restless water, impounded by the ice barrier, sought to continue its journey down stream.

They had one flare and two bombs left and they had failed to break the jam.

Tim motioned for Ralph to light one of the two remaining flares and in the calcium glare he made a final survey of the river. His arm moved quickly and Ralph tossed out the last of the bombs.

They watched the little black objects speed toward the ice; then saw them swallowed in mounting sprays of ice and water.

Tim could hear Ralph's shout of victory above the sound of their own motor and the rumble of the river as the waters,

the ice barrier finally broken, started down stream.

The river was a heaving, moving mass of ice. Great cakes leaped high into the air and came down with thundering crashes as the pressure of the water was unleashed.

Tim watched the breaking of the jam with apprehension. There was just a chance that the river might rush over its banks and sweep away the village but if he had calculated right the force of the on-rushing water would be expended on the far side of the valley.

The light from the fires on the edge of the river reflected dully on the scene and was not sufficient to show them what was taking place. After five minutes of anxious cruising, Tim yelled to Ralph to light the last of their flares.

The brilliant white light revealed a scene majestic in its power yet terrible in its uncontrolled fury.

Thousands of tons of ice were moving down stream, sweeping everything before them but they were moving in the direction Tim had planned. The ice was piling over the banks of the river, leveling great trees, crushing the few barns and small

buildings on the far side of the river, but the village itself was safe and already the villagers were starting to return to their homes.

A dozen men who had come down to the river bank to watch the ice go out waved their thanks at the flying reporters.

With his goal reached and success at hand, Tim felt a great drowziness creep over him. His hand lost its firm grip on the stick and his eyes closed in spite of himself. He managed to shake off the fatigue and shouted to Ralph to take the plane.

Ralph fitted the extra stick in the control socket in the forward cockpit and waggled the controls, indicating that he was ready.

The *Good News* turned away from Auburn, away from the tumbling mass of ice in the Cedar River, and sped toward home. Tim, exhausted by the strenuous experiences of the day, dropped into a deep slumber and did not awaken until Ralph plopped into a mud puddle on their home field.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE story of the flying reporters and their successful effort to break the ice jam which threatened Auburn was the front page news the next day. Tim and Ralph collaborated in writing the story of their night flights and the managing editor wrote a front page editorial praising them for their heroism and devotion to duty.

A telegram from the mayor of Auburn, in which he expressed the appreciation and gratefulness of the residents of the village, was also printed in a box on the front page.

Dan Watkins, the veteran chief of the copy desk, smiled at Tim when the first edition came off the press.

"Looks like you and Ralph have just about monopolized the front page," said the gray-haired copyreader.

"I'd just as soon not be there," said Tim.

"I know, I know," said Watkins, "but it is all fine advertising for the *News*. Wonder if you chaps will get a raise or a bonus."

"I wasn't looking for either one when

I decided to make the attempt," said Tim. "I only thought of those poor folks in the valley who were faced with the loss of their homes if the jam broke."

"I know you weren't looking for personal gain or glory," replied the copy-reader, who had long been a friend and valued adviser of Tim's. "You do what you think is right; that's one reason why you are invaluable to the *News*. Last night the managing editor paced the floor every minute you were in the air. Keep at it, Tim, and one of these days you'll be the managing editor of some large paper."

After the noon edition was on the press the managing editor summoned Tim and Ralph to his desk.

"What about the condition of the *Good News?*" he asked Tim.

"You'll have to pay for a complete repaint job, Mr. Carson," said Tim. "The ship was badly scorched and smoked up when we got caught in the explosion over the flaming oil tanks. It ought to have the rigging thoroughly checked to see that nothing was sprung in the hard flying I did the rest of the day."

"All right, Tim," said the managing

editor. "You and Ralph take the afternoon off, go out to the field, and get a crew started on the repainting. Never can tell when we'll need the plane in another emergency and it has become invaluable."

"Then the stories we've uncovered in the last year have justified the expense of the plane?" Tim asked eagerly.

"No question about it," replied the managing editor. "You have done far more than either the business manager or I expected and your aviation column is one of our best news features. The only thing I worry about is that you boys will crash one of these days."

"Don't worry about that," put in Ralph. "There is little danger for we have a good ship and we try not to take unnecessary chances."

Tim and Ralph went to the administration building when they reached the airport. They found Carl Hunter in his office.

"Hello, heroes," he called, whereupon Tim and Ralph gave him a good-natured pummeling that left them all breathless.

"Now that the cyclone is over," smiled the field manager, "I suppose you want something."

"You're right for once," said Tim. "We want you to put a crew on repainting the *Good News* and checking up on the rigging. Carson said to get it done in a hurry for we may need the ship at any time."

"I had a hunch you'd breeze in sometime today with a request like that," replied the field manager, "and I'm one up on you. A couple of painters are waiting in the hangar now. Same color job as before?"

"The same," said Tim, "and I hope this one will last longer than the one we scorched off."

"You may not be so lucky the next time you start flirting with burning tanks of oil," warned Hunter.

"There won't be any next time," promised Ralph. "We've had our fill of those thrills. No more dodging a chunk of steel that's intent on destroying us. Honestly, I lived a whole lifetime in that split second."

Hunter and the young reporters left the administration building and walked to hangar No. 5. The scorched and blackened plane that reposed inside was hardly recognizable as the *Good News*.

Hunter gave his instructions to the

painters and they started cleaning the wings and fuselage preparatory to repainting the plane. Several mechanics were summoned and they set about the task of making a thorough check of the motor and the rigging of the *Good News*.

When they left the hangar and started back for their car, a raw, wet wind cut through their clothes.

"Feels like another blizzard is getting ready to descend on us," remarked Ralph as he scanned the sky.

"Weather report says 'continued cloudy'," replied the field manager, "and I'm hoping it's right. Another blizzard would raise havoc with us. Everyone of our planes is carrying its capacity of mail and we're making every possible effort to keep on schedule."

"Ralph is inclined to be pessimistic today," laughed Tim. "He's always predicting a blizzard or cloudburst."

A clerk ran out of the administration building and called to them.

"You're wanted on the telephone," he told Tim.

The flying reporter hurried to answer the summons. When he rejoined Ralph

several minutes later his face was grave.

"Something's in the wind," he said. "Carson just phoned from the office and wants us to go to town as fast as we can."

"Have any idea what he wants?" asked Ralph as they climbed into the roadster which had brought them to the field.

"Not a glimmer," replied Tim. "There is something mighty mysterious. He talked so low I could hardly hear what he said. We're not to go to the office. Carson will meet us in room 309 at the Hotel Jefferson."

"Sounds like secret service," said Ralph.

"That might not be so far wrong," replied Tim thoughtfully.

Fifteen minutes later the reporters entered the Hotel Jefferson and made their way to the third floor. They stopped at the door of room 309 and Tim knocked.

The door was opened by the managing editor of the *News*, who motioned for them to enter the room.

There were two men beside the managing editor in the room when Tim and Ralph entered. They were strangers to the reporters and they waited for Carson to introduce them.

"When I introduce these men," Carson told his reporters, "You'll know why I had you come to the hotel."

The managing editor turned to the older of the strangers, a heavy-set, gray-haired man whose eyes were of an unusual, penetrating blue.

"Boys," he said, "I want you to know Col. Robert Searle, head of the state police department."

Tim and Ralph felt their pulses quicken as they heard the name of the visitor. The managing editor turned to introduce the second man, who was taller than Searle and younger by several years.

"And I also want you to know," went on the managing editor, "Captain Ned Raymond of the bureau of investigation of the state police."

Tim and Ralph acknowledged the introductions and sat down on the bed. They waited for the managing editor to continue.

"These men have called on us for assistance," explained Carson. "I want them to tell you their troubles and the final decision on what you do will be up to you."

Colonel Searle moved restlessly.

"I've heard a great deal about you boys," he said "especially in connection with the Sky Hawk. You did great work there but I thought you were older."

"An older man wouldn't be as fast, as alert, as Tim and Ralph," said their managing editor.

"Perhaps you're right," agreed Colonel Searle.

"Captain Raymond and I are playing a hunch," he went on, "and we have both agreed that if this hunch comes true we are going to need your aid. The airplane has placed an entirely new means of escape in the hands of criminals and we must be ready to combat this. With the present economy policy of the state legislature it would be impossible for us to secure funds for the training of our troopers as pilots or for the purchase of an airplane. For that reason we came here today to appeal to your managing editor."

The head of the state police paused for a moment.

"Interested?" he asked.

"Go on," chorused Tim and Ralph.

"What we have in mind," continued Colonel Searle, "is deputising you two for

special service. If any emergency arises in which we need an airplane in this section of the state, you would be available. It would also insure your paper of being in first on big news stories."

"If Mr. Carson is favorable," said Tim, "you can count on Ralph and me."

"Just a minute," put in Captain Raymond. "One thing more. There has been a change in the political set-up in Dearborn and as a result many criminals are going to be driven out of that city and forced to other fields. It will be natural for some of them to transfer their activities to this state. If they come, as we confidently expect, they will be more dangerous than the average bandit. And remember, the Sky Hawk is gone but some of his men are still alive. Through special police channels we have learned that several of them have banded together again and have been operating in and near Dearborn. If they decide to come back this way your mission might be doubly dangerous."

"They couldn't be any worse than the Sky Hawk," said Ralph.

"In that case," said Colonel Searle, "I consider it an honor and a privilege to ap-

point you as special and secret members of the state police."

Captain Raymond produced the records which Tim and Ralph were to sign and in less than five minutes they were in the state police.

Colonel Searle gave them identification cards and the small gold eagle which also indicated their position.

"We may not need you," said Captain Raymond, "but if things come out as I predict, it won't be long before part of the Sky Hawk's old gang will be back. The Hawk is gone, thanks to you boys, but the memory of his methods and daring lives on in the minds of the men who associated with him."

As the newspaper men prepared to leave, Colonel Searle added a final word of caution.

"Remember, not a word about our meeting here to anyone. If it becomes known in any way, that we have enlisted you as special agents, it might expose you to needless danger. That's why we had you meet us here instead of in your office."

Tim and Ralph were the first to leave room 309. In spite of their excitement

they did not speak until they were back in their car where their conversation could not be overheard.

"What do you think of it?" asked Ralph.

"Looks like the state police are expecting serious trouble and are getting ready for it."

"You mean the Sky Hawk's old gang?"

"Exactly."

"I thought they were through when we got the Sky Hawk," said Ralph.

"I had hoped so," said Tim, "but I guess it was too good to be true. If they do come this way, they won't have any love for us."

Ralph looked down at the little gold eagle in the palm of his hand.

"At least we'll have the power of the state police behind us," he said.

"And we'll probably need it," added Tim.

CHAPTER FIVE

TIM and Ralph returned to the *News* office where Tim busied himself writing copy for his aviation column in the next day's paper.

Among the letters he found on his desk was one from the news director of the Transcontinental Air Mail Company at San Francisco. The letter contained an announcement of the company plans to increase their passenger and air mail service to three trips a day each way across country. It would mean the inauguration of the most auspicious air transport program in the country.

The letter went on to say that giant trimotored biplanes, capable of carrying 18 passengers and half a ton of mail or express, were being completed in the Transcontinental's shops. A half dozen of the new planes would be put in service with the opening of the new schedule and a dozen more would be completed as rapidly as possible.

The letter indicated that all of the planes

would stop at Atkinson, which meant Tim's home city would have the best transcontinental air service in the country. The story was news, big news, and he devoted the remainder of the afternoon to writing it. He got in touch with Carl Hunter at the field and learned that Hunter had just received instructions to put on an extra ground crew. The postmaster supplied information on the value of the increased air mail service to bankers and business men and when Tim had finished gathering his material he had enough for a two column story.

The young aviation editor of the *News* worked until six o'clock, went out for a hasty dinner, and returned to the office to complete his story. The aviation copy must be ready the first thing in the morning to send to the waiting Linotypes.

Tim checked the facts in his story carefully. When he finished reading it over he felt that it was a creditable news story, certainly it was interesting and he thought it fairly well written.

Ralph, who had been sent out late in the afternoon to cover a service club dinner, came stamping into the office.

"Of all the hot air," he exploded, "I've listened to a prize assortment in the last hour and a half. I'm always getting stuck for some assignment like this."

Tim had little sympathy to offer and Ralph went over to his typewriter and banged savagely at the keys.

At nine o'clock the boys decided to call it a day. Tim had written the last line of copy for his aviation department and Ralph had managed to finish his story on the dinner.

The air was raw and bitter when they reached the street and heavy clouds obscured the stars.

"Nasty night for the air mail," commented Tim as he turned up the collar of his coat.

"Going to snow before morning," predicted Ralph.

"Hope you're wrong," replied Tim. "We've had enough winter. I'm ready for spring."

The young reporters walked to the corner where they boarded different street cars. Ralph started home and Tim went to his room.

Tim undressed when he reached his

room, selected an interesting adventure novel, and stretched out on his bed to read. Lost in the thrilling exploits of the hero of the novel, he did not notice the passage of time. The coolness of the room finally aroused him and when he looked at the clock it was nearly midnight.

Tim got up and felt the radiator. It was cold and the wind was whistling in the eaves outside his window. He looked down into the street. Faint swirls of snow danced along the paving and while he watched the air became thick with snowflakes.

The wind was increasing, whipping the snow into a blizzard. Tim could hardly see beyond the first street light. He looked at the clock again. It would be tough on the air mail flyers if they were between landing fields or in the Great Smokies when the storm broke. The rugged peaks of the mountains would be merciless on such a night.

Tim turned to the telephone and called the municipal airport. After an interval Carl Hunter answered.

"How is the mail?" asked Tim.

"Getting a bad break," snapped Hunter.

"The storm dropped like a blanket and two of the ships were caught in the Great Smokies. We haven't heard from either the eastbound or the westbound for more than half an hour."

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing until the storm breaks."

"And then?"

"Send out rescue planes if I can find anyone to fly them. All of the mail pilots are on the east end of the division and even if the storm lets up at daybreak it will be noon before they can get here."

"You can count Ralph and me for anything we can do," promised Tim.

"Thanks a lot," replied the field manager. "I'd appreciate it if you would come out now. I'm here all alone and my nerves are getting jumpy in the storm. Bring plenty of heavy clothes for the temperature is dropping fast. May be near zero by morning."

Tim promised to go to the field at once and after Hunter had hung up the receiver telephoned for Ralph. A sleepy-sounding voice finally answered his summons and in a few words Tim explained what was needed.

"I'll throw on some clothes and hop a cab for the field," said Ralph, all thought of sleep having vanished.

Tim dressed carefully and warmly for he had a hunch it would be a good many hours before he saw bed again and from past experiences he was wise enough to follow his hunch.

The flying reporter phoned for a cab and then went downstairs to await its arrival. He stopped at the door of his landlady's room and slipped a note under to tell of his sudden departure. Then he went into the front hallway. The lights of a cab gleamed dimly through the snow and Tim hastened out into the storm.

The taxi driver, heavily bundled, grunted as Tim gave his destination.

"Sure you want to get to the airport?" demanded the driver.

"Can't you make it?" asked Tim.

"Don't know," replied the taxi man. "The snow is drifting fast and that road is bad on a night like this."

"See how far you can get," said Tim as he climbed into the cab.

With a grinding of gears the cab moved into the storm. The snow was fall-

ing in a solid blanket that obscured even the buildings flanking the street. Lights were visible for only a few feet and Tim and the driver felt as though they were in a world of their own.

Once or twice the cab slid into the curb but each time the driver managed to keep it under way and they finally pulled through the gate at the airport. Tim told the driver to charge the trip to the *News* and was about to enter the administration building when another cab jolted to a stop.

Ralph, bundled in a heavy coat, hopped out and followed Tim into the field manager's office.

Hunter, a radiophone headset at his ears, was listening intently to an air mail report. He motioned for the boys to take chairs and went on with his work.

The reporters waited until Hunter had finished taking the message.

"What news now?" asked Tim.

"Bad news," replied the field manager. "Two planes lost somewhere in the Great Smokies. It's a cinch that the storm forced them down and you know how much chance there is of making a safe set-down on a night like this."

"Who were on the ships?" Ralph wanted to know.

"Tiny Lewis was coming east and George Mitchell was on the westbound," replied Hunter.

"They don't make any better flyers than those two," commented Tim.

"But they can't buck a storm like this," Hunter reminded. "Why, man alive, you can't see ten feet ahead of you."

"Maybe they had a break and landed when the first flakes started down," suggested Ralph.

"You're too optimistic," replied the field manager. "This storm wasn't on the weather charts. It just dropped down from nowhere. I don't believe those ships could have stayed up two minutes after they nosed into the storm and neither one of the pilots had time to use their radiophones."

"Good thing they had parachutes," said Ralph.

"I'm afraid chutes wouldn't do them much good," said Tim. "They wouldn't have time to use them and wouldn't know where they were going if they did. We'll find Lewis and Mitchell with the planes."

Conversation stopped. There was no use to say anything more. They knew the air mail pilots had stuck by their ships. When the storm cleared they would find the ships and the pilots and they only hoped that in some miraculous fashion the ships had not crashed too hard.

At four o'clock the storm lessened and the wind abated. At five o'clock there was only a trace of snow in the air and at six o'clock the mechanics had struggled through the drifts from town and were warming up two reserve mail planes. The *Good News*, its fuselage damp from the coat of paint, was in no condition to take the air and Hunter had placed two of the Transcontinental's planes at the disposal of the flying reporters.

Tim and Ralph loaded thermos bottles of hot chocolate into the cockpits of their planes, put in first aid kits, ropes and hand axes and generally prepared for any emergency that might confront them.

Abundant supplies of extra blankets were tossed into the mail compartment ahead of the pilot's cockpit and the hood was strapped down.

The motors of the great green and silver

biplanes droned steadily as Tim and Ralph seated themselves at the controls.

"Locate them first," Hunter shouted to the reporters. "If you can't land and bring them out yourselves, come back and get help. Good luck and—hurry!"

Tim and Ralph fully understood the urgency of their mission and they swung the tails of their planes around, opened the throttles and bounced over the field in a smother of snow.

The mail planes, their 525 horsepower motors barking in the near zero weather, lifted off the field and sailed away toward the Great Smokies. Somewhere hidden in the dim peaks to the west were the air mail planes and their pilots.

CHAPTER SIX

THE heavy mail plane was much different from the *Good News* and Tim spent the first five minutes in the air getting used to the controls and the feel of the ship. The air speed indicator showed one hundred ten miles an hour with a quartering wind.

The sky was clear and the cold air made him thankful for the heavy flying clothes he had donned before climbing into the ship.

The flying reporters had mapped out their plan of action before leaving the field at Atkinson. Tim was to search for Lewis while Ralph would hunt for Mitchell. Lewis, on the eastbound plane, would have been the farthest from the Atkinson field, and Tim gunned his ship hard as he headed for the mountains.

The frosty peaks of the Great Smokies loomed ahead of the churning propeller, ready to snag any unfortunate plane and pilot.

Tim adjusted his headset and tuned the radiophone in on the station at Atkinson.

Hunter was talking with the air mail station west of the mountains when Tim broke in with his buzzer signal.

"Any news?" he asked.

"Not a word," replied the field manager. "Looks like whatever rescuing is done today will have to be handled by you and Ralph. We won't have extra ships and pilots here until nightfall and that will be too late. You'll have to find Lewis and Mitchell today."

"We'll find them if it is humanly possible," promised Tim.

They were well into the foothills of the mountains when Ralph signaled that he was going to start his search for Mitchell, who had been on the westbound ship the night before.

Ralph circled downward while Tim continued his dash toward the formidable, rocky crests in the west.

According to all the information available, Lewis should have been on the east side of the divide. Five minutes before the blizzard struck he had radiophoned that he was about to cross the crest of the range.

Tim had been up an hour and a half

when he reached the higher slopes and precipices of the mountains. He shoved the mail plane up and up until he was almost to the divide before he started his detailed search for the missing plane and pilot.

Back and forth Tim cruised the mail plane, dodging in and out of canyons, circling over sheer precipices that fell away for a thousand feet, scanning the snow and the rocks for some sign.

The powerful motor was using great quantities of fuel and Tim watched the gasoline gauge with an anxious eye. At nine o'clock he had fuel for a little more than another hour of flying. To have gone back to Atkinson was out of the question. He would land at some village or ranch in the foothills, replenish his gasoline tanks, and resume the search.

Half an hour later he switched on the radiophone and informed the field manager that he was temporarily abandoning his search. Hunter directed Tim to the nearest ranch where fuel would be available and the flying reporter snapped off the radiophone and glided down off the divide.

Ten minutes later he swung low over ranch buildings which nestled in a shel-

tered valley in the foothills. Below the buildings was a level meadow, the only piece of ground that appeared safe to attempt a landing.

The noise of the airplane motor brought men from the ranch buildings and Tim waved at them.

Smoke coming from a chimney of the ranch house gave him his wind direction and he dropped down on the meadow to make a careful survey. The field, although covered by six or seven inches of snow, appeared level.

Tim gunned the motor, banked sharply, and fishtailed down. The mail plane landed hard, bounced on a low ridge, threatened to dig its nose into a drift, and finally straightened out, coming to a standstill not more than ten feet from a barbed wire fence.

The flying reporter unfastened his safety belt and stood up in the cockpit. His legs ached with the cold, which had crept through his heavy boots and clothing to chill the very marrow of his bones.

Half a dozen cowboys plowed through the drifted snow. They greeted Tim with cheery cries.

"Your off the trail, Big Boy," said the first cowboy to reach the plane.

"I'm all right," replied Tim, "But I've been out all morning looking for one of the air mail ships that was lost in the blizzard last night."

"Someone get caught in the mountains?" another cowboy asked.

"Two planes," replied Tim. "One of them was the westbound ship and the other was eastbound. They were last heard from just before the blizzard closed down."

"Gosh," said the first cowboy, "The Great Smokies are a tough bunch of hills for anyone to be caught in a storm."

"We've got two planes out searching for them," explained Tim. "I ran low on gas and thought maybe you fellows would have some at the ranch you could spare. It would save me a long trip back to Atkinson."

A heavy-set, red-faced man had made his way to the green and silver mail plane. He had overheard Tim's request and stepped up to the plane to introduce himself.

"I'm Hank Cummins, owner of the Circle Four Ranch," he said. "You're

welcome to all the gasoline you need and anything else we can do to help you."

Tim introduced himself and found that the owner of the Circle Four and all of his men had read of his exploits as the flying reporter.

"You're one of the fellows who got the Sky Hawk last year!" exclaimed a cowboy.

Tim grinned and nodded.

The owner of the ranch started giving orders and the cowboys hurried away to fill cans with gasoline and replenish the nearly empty fuel tanks of the mail plane.

Tim crawled stiffly from the cockpit. It felt good to be on the ground again with a chance to exercise his stiffened muscles. He flailed his arms to bring back the circulation and stamped his feet on the ground.

In five minutes the cowboys were back with the heavy cans of gasoline and Tim directed their efforts. A short time later and the mail plane was ready to go again.

"Better come up to the house and have a snack to eat before you start," urged Mr. Cummins.

"I haven't any time to spare," replied Tim.

"It will be time saved," said the ranch owner. "You get some warm food inside and you'll be a lot more alert. Come on up to the house and sit down at the table for a few minutes."

Tim finally agreed and accompanied the rancher to the house.

A Chinese cook served hot coffee, bacon and eggs and the food gave Tim new courage and enthusiasm to resume his gruelling search.

When the flying reporter returned to the meadow he found that the cowboys had appointed themselves a ground crew and had turned the mail plane around. Several of them, armed with shovels, were busy clearing a path through a heavy drift that extended across the middle of the field.

Tim thanked Mr. Cummins for his kindness and promised to send a check to cover the bill for the gasoline.

"That's all right," laughed the rancher. "We're glad to be able to help you."

The flying reporter climbed into the cockpit, switched on the starter, and heard the motor roar on the second or third time over.

The propeller spewed fine snow in every

direction and the cowboys ran for shelter before the driving white particles.

Tim throttled down, aimed his plane down the makeshift runway, and gave her the gun.

The mail ship bounced over the frozen surface of the meadow, swung dangerously as the wheels bit into the soft snow which the cowboys had attempted to clear away, and finally nosed into the air. Tim took his time in gaining altitude and then swung back over the ranch. He waved at the group below and could see them reply. Then he headed into the west to resume his search on the treacherous slopes of the Great Smokies.

Noon found Tim deep in the fastnesses of the mountains, searching obscure pockets and canyons, then roaring along thinly forested slopes where a motor failure would have spelled instant destruction.

One o'clock.

Two o'clock.

Still there was no trace of the missing plane.

The sun had cleared away the clouds of the morning and the visibility was good. The air was a little warmer but Tim was

forced to beat his arms against his body to keep them from stiffening in the cold.

The supply of gasoline he had obtained at the ranch was getting low when he knew that he was near the end of the search. There was just enough to explore a distant tier of peaks that swung off to his right. Not much chance of the mail being that far off the regular airway but he didn't dare let any possibility escape.

Tim scanned the broken walls of rock ahead. There seemed little chance that a pilot could escape if his plane crashed in such a country.

The flying reporter was about to abandon his search when something on the crest of a jagged ridge drew his attention. He swung the mail ship nearer and circled down for a closer view. It looked—it looked—yes, it was, the tail of an air mail plane sticking up above the rocks.

Tim stood up in the cockpit and cried aloud. He had found the eastbound mail!

Was there a chance that the pilot had survived the crash? The question raced through Tim's mind and he sent the air mail plane hurtling downward.

He levelled off two feet above the peak

which had impaled the eastbound mail and circled carefully. He made two complete swings and there was no sign of life in the wrecked plane.

Lewis, pilot of the eastbound, must have been flying blind, attempting to make a landing, when he struck the crag. The mail had evidently hit the peak at a sharp downward angle. The tail had been ripped off and left to serve as a solitary beacon which eventually brought Tim to the scene. The rest of the plane had skidded and bounced along the far slope of the mountain for more than a hundred feet, finally coming to rest in a small clump of straggling mountain pine. The tough tree trunks had crumpled the wings back along the fuselage and Tim had to admit that it was just about as complete a washout as he had ever seen.

There was no ledge along the mountain on which he could make a landing and he had about decided to return to Atkinson and report when a slight movement in the wreckage attracted his attention.

Tim dropped the heavy mail plane as low as he dared and cut his motor down to a minimum. He was not more than fifty

feet above the clump of pines which held the wreck of the air mail. From the splintered wood and canvas he saw an arm emerge and then the face of Tiny Lewis, one of the best pilots in the service.

The flying reporter was low enough to glimpse the wild stare in Lewis's eyes and he knew that the pilot had been knocked out of his senses by the crash. While Tim watched Lewis collapsed and sank back into the wreckage. The motor of Tim's ship had aroused some inner sense and Lewis had made a supreme effort to make his presence known.

Tim looked about eagerly for a landing field. The nearest level ground was at least three miles down the mountain and on the other side. There was only one thing to do—speed for help. The Circle Four Ranch was nearest and Tim opened the throttle of the mail ship and sped into the east.

He wondered how Lewis had managed to withstand the cold of the night and day. Perhaps he had been sheltered somewhat by the wreckage of the plane.

It was just after three o'clock when Tim roared over the Circle Four ranch

house and set the mail plane down in the pasture with little ceremony. By the time he had taxied back to the side of the field nearest the ranch buildings Cummins and his cowboys were climbing the fence.

"I've found the eastbound plane and pilot," shouted Tim, "and I need more gas and a couple of men to fly back with me and help get the pilot out. He appears hurt and is caught in the wreckage."

Hank Cummins roared orders with great gusto and the cowboys hurried to carry them out. The fuel tanks were refilled in record time.

"You say you needed two men?" asked the owner of the Circle Four.

"It will be a long climb up the mountain," said Tim, "and we may have to carry Lewis down. He weighs something over two hundred pounds and that won't be any picnic if he can't walk."

"I'll say you need two men then," said Cummins. "Looks to me like there's room for three or four in that mail hole there."

"There is room enough," explained Tim, "but remember we'll have to count on bringing Lewis back with us."

"We could leave a couple of the boys

on the mountain," said the ranchman. "Give them plenty of blankets and we can send after them tomorrow. Sounds to me like we'll need lots of help."

"All right," agreed Tim. "You pick the men and we'll get under way."

Cummins turned to the cowboys, all of whom were eager to make the trip.

"Curly, Boots and Jim," he called, and three husky punchers stepped up to the side of the plane.

"Pile in boys," urged Tim. "You'll have to lay down in the mail compartment and you won't get a chance to see very much scenery if you put the top down."

"Leave her up," cried Curly, "I've always wanted to see how this dog-goned country looked from the air."

"You're the doctor," laughed Tim. "Don't blame me if you get pretty cold on the flight to the mountains."

Extra blankets for the punchers who would stay in the Great Smokies were stowed aboard and a haversack of food was handed up to the plane. Then willing hands swung the mail ship around, Tim opened the throttle, and they bounced over the meadow and into the air.

In a little more than half an hour Tim circled over the only level ground on the side of the mountain. There was a long, narrow gash that appeared smooth enough for a landing and he set the mail ship down cautiously. The first time he overshot the mark and had to try again. On the second attempt he made a perfect three point and killed his speed quickly.

Tim shut off the motor and climbed out of his cockpit. The cowboys tumbled down from the mail compartment while Cummins tossed the blankets, rope and hand axes after them.

The mail plane was rolled to some near-by trees and securely lashed down. Tim was taking no chances on a sudden wind destroying their means of escape from the mountains.

After making sure that the plane was safe, they started the long climb up the mountain. At times they moved rapidly, especially where the wind had swept the snow off the rocks. But again their progress was heart-breaking, deep drifts forcing them to fight for every foot of headway.

Up and up they climbed, stopping only

occasionally to rest. The cowboys were in good physical condition and Tim was glad that he kept himself in shape. The strenuous climb might have killed a man who was not sound in heart and lungs.

The last, long climb was in sight when they stopped for a short rest.

"Boy," sputtered Curly, "I'm glad I'm not a mail pilot. Believe me, I'll stay on the ground and chase the dogies. Think of smashing up in a place like this."

"It is pretty wild," admitted Tim, "but the boys don't crack up very often."

They resumed the climb and managed to reach the crest of the mountain just as the sun disappeared behind a higher range in the west.

The tail of the wrecked plane had been the lone sentinel which had guided them in their long climb. It had been impaled by a tooth-like rock that held it firmly. In the pines on the other slope they could see the wreckage of the plane and the marks in the snow plainly showed the course of the stricken ship.

The rescue party hurried down the steep slope. Tim, in the lead, was the first to reach the wreckage.

"Tiny! Tiny!" he called.

There was no answer.

"Tiny! Tiny!" he shouted and the mountains mocked him with their echoes.

Tim plunged into the wreckage, working toward the place where he had seen the arm and face of the pilot when he had discovered the wreck.

With Cummins at his side, he fairly tore the wreckage apart until they came to the pilot's cockpit. An arm through a piece of canvas was the first indication that Lewis was still in the plane.

Then they found him! He was wedged into the cockpit. His eyes were closed and he was breathing slowly. His face was white in the gathering dusk.

The cowboys, with their hand axes, hacked a path out of the wreckage and they lifted Lewis from his trap and carried him out into the open where they spread blankets and laid him down.

The owner of the Circle Four, who professed to have a slight knowledge of physical ailments, went over the injured flyer carefully.

"He'll probably be on the shelf a few months," he said when he had completed

his examination, "but I think he'll pull through all right."

"What's wrong?" asked Tim.

"Looks to me like a considerable number of broken ribs, and a good hard crack on the head that might be a slight fracture, and exposure, of which the exposure is about as bad as any."

The cowboys built a roaring fire that cast eerie shadows on the wreckage of the mail and then proceeded to loosen the injured flyers clothes. Lewis' body was thoroughly warmed and the circulation restored to his arms and feet before they bundled him up for the trip down the mountain.

It was eight o'clock before they were ready to start the descent. The hours had been spent in cutting a plentiful supply of pine knots which would serve as torches and in fashioning a stretcher on which to carry the injured flyer.

According to the plan outlined by the ranchman, four of them would carry the stretcher while the fifth would go ahead, lighting the trail with one of the pine knots.

The mail flyer was still unconscious

when they placed him on the makeshift stretcher but he was made comfortable with an abundance of blankets.

Tim took one of the forward handles of the stretcher, Cummins took the other and Boots and Jim undertook to carry the back end. Curly, his arms loaded with the pine fagots, went ahead to light the way.

The stretcher was heavy and bundlesome and even the short distance to the crest of the mountain was a cruel struggle. They were almost exhausted when they reached the top and put down the stretcher. However, the rest of the journey to the plane would be down hill.

They alternated carrying the stretcher and the torches and made fair progress. When their supply of pine pieces ran low they were forced to call a halt while Boots and Jim hunted up a clump of pines and secured a new supply.

The trip down the mountains required three hours and it was eleven o'clock when they finally staggered into the clearing that sheltered the waiting mail plane.

When they let the stretcher down, they heard the injured flyer groan. Tim bent low over Lewis.

"Where am I? What's happened?" demanded the air mail pilot, his voice little more than a whisper.

"You crashed in the storm," replied Tim. "We found you in the Great Smokies and are getting ready to take you back to Atkinson. How do you feel?"

"Kind of smashed up inside," whispered Lewis.

"Hang on a couple of hours longer and we'll have you in a hospital," smiled Tim. "How about it, old man?"

"Sure, Sure," was the low reply.

The cowboys helped Tim wheel the mail plane around and head it down the narrow clearing. Then they lifted Lewis into the mail compartment and onto the bed they had prepared for him.

Tim turned to the owner of the Circle Four.

"I'd better head straight for Atkinson when I take off," he said. "Two of the boys will have to stay here and I'll bring the two who go with me back to the ranch in the morning."

"That's all right with us," agreed Cummins. "Curly and I will make the trip with you and Boots and Jim can stay here

tonight. In the morning they can go back and bring down the mail. The boys from the ranch will meet them with horses sometime in the forenoon."

Boots and Jim took armsful of the pine fagots and hurried down the clearing. They placed flaming torches to light to take off and Tim started the motor while Cummins and Curly crawled into the mail compartment to look after Lewis.

Tim exercised great care in warming up the motor. It must not fail him when he called on it to lift the heavy plane into the night sky. Finally satisfied that the motor was functioning perfectly, Tim settled himself in the cockpit and opened the throttle. The narrow clearing, dimly outlined by the uncertain light of the pine torches, was none too long. The mail plane started slowly, then gathered speed and flashed into the night.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TIM fought the controls as the mail plane careened down the clearing in the dim light of the blazing pine torches. He heard, faintly, the encouraging shouts of Boots and Jim as they cheered for a successful takeoff.

The odds were terrific. The clearing was barely long enough for a takeoff with the best of conditions. The ground was uneven and the snow materially checked his speed. Tim waited until the end of the clearing loomed. Then he pulled back on the stick and jerked the plane off the ground. They zoomed into the night sky and Tim breathed easier, but only for a second. The motor missed and he felt the loss of flying speed. He instantly switched to the other magneto and the motor resumed its rhythmic firing. It was just in time for the plane had dropped dangerously low.

Tim circled over the clearing, got his directions, and then headed in a direct airline for Atkinson. The mail plane hurtled

through the night at one hundred thirty miles an hour, its maximum speed, and Tim pushed it every mile of the way.

It was hard work piloting the mail for every muscle and bone in his body cried with fatigue. The long hours in the air, and the struggle up and down the mountain had sapped his energy. In spite of the cold, he found it hard to keep awake.

The motor droned steadily and its song lulled Tim into a dangerous state of lassitude. His eyes grew heavy and once or twice he caught himself dozing.

The flying reporter realized fully the danger of going to sleep at the controls and used every power at his command to ward off the sleepiness. He beat his arms against his body, stamped his feet on the floor of the cockpit and even stood up so that the icy blast from the propeller beat against his cheeks. The remedies would be effective for four or five minutes. Then he would feel himself slipping again. Each time it was harder to arouse himself to the task of moving his arms and legs, of standing up and facing the chilling slipstream.

They were not more than twenty-five miles from Atkinson when Tim's eyes fi-

nally closed and his head fell forward. His hands, which had gripped the stick in desperate determination, relaxed and the mail ship cruised on with its pilot asleep in the cockpit.

For three or four minutes all went well. The mail plane, a well rigged craft, maintained an even keel and Hank Cummins and Curly, crouched in the mail compartment with the injured Lewis, had no intimation that Tim was not at his post of duty.

Then a vagrant night wind swept out of the north and caught the plane at a quartering angle. The stick waggled impatiently as though signalling Tim that his attention was needed. Finding no master hand to control it, the stick gave up the job and surrendered to the wind.

The mail veered off to the south, went into a tight bank, and ended up in a screaming nose dive.

The wires shrieked as the air speed increased and the motor added its crescendo to the din.

The plane had dropped one thousand feet and was less than nine hundred feet above the ground when the terrific noise

penetrated Tim's sub-conscious mind.

When he opened his eyes he knew they were in a power dive, heading for the earth at nearly two hundred miles an hour. Without glancing at the altimeter Tim seized the stick and attempted to bring the plane out of its dive.

The motor pulsated with new power and gradually, carefully he brought the nose up. When he felt that the wings would not snap off under the tremendous strain, he levelled off.

Tim looked below. Not a hundred feet away he could see the outline of objects on the ground. Another second or two of sleep and they would all have been wiped out in a crash.

He wiped the cold perspiration from his brow, relaxed just a bit, and set a new course for Atkinson.

Ten minutes later he could see the lights of the city reflected in the sky and in another five minutes he was circling down to a landing on the municipal field.

The great Sperry floodlight, used when the air mail planes were landing or taking off, bathed the field in its blue-white brilliance. It was as light as day and Tim set

the heavy ship down as lightly as a feather. He taxied up to the administration building and an ambulance, waiting near the gate, backed down toward his plane.

"They telephoned from the Circle Four that you had found Lewis and his ship," shouted Carl Hunter as he hurried up to the plane.

"Found him on top of a mountain," replied Tim. "He's some smashed up inside but I think he'll pull through. The mail is still in the plane but two of the boys from the Circle Four are watching it and they'll start down with it tomorrow."

The field manager took charge of the situation and they lifted the injured flyer down from the mail cockpit. Lewis was unconscious again but was breathing deeply and freely. The young surgeon with the ambulance gave him a cursory examination.

"He'll pull through all right," was his verdict as he swung into the ambulance and it started its dash for the hospital in the city.

Tim was so tired and chilled that he had to be helped from the cockpit. His legs, aching from the cold and the arduous ex-

ertion of the day, simply folded up under him.

Hank Cummins grinned at him.

"I don't feel much better myself," he admitted. "And gosh, what an appetite climbing a mountain gives a fellow. Let's eat."

Supported by the ranchman on one side and the field manager on the other, Tim made his way to the administration building.

"Ralph must have come in early since he didn't wait for me," said Tim as they entered the manager's office.

Hunter did not answer immediately and Tim turned toward him with anxious eyes.

"What's the matter, Carl?" he demanded. "Isn't Ralph in; haven't you heard from him?"

"We haven't had any news," admitted the field manager, "but you know Ralph well enough to realize that he can take care of himself in almost any kind of an emergency."

Tim knew that Ralph was capable and resourceful but he had also had a vivid demonstration of the dangers of flying in the Great Smokies.

"I've got to start out and hunt for him," he cried. "Have the boys get the plane ready to go."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," snorted Hunter. "You're in no shape to fly. Look at your eyes. You'd be sound asleep in ten minutes and then we'd have to start looking for you. No sir! You stay right here, put some warm food inside and then roll in. The mail planes are going through tonight on schedule and they've all been instructed to look for some sign of a campfire in the mountains. Ralph may have found the wrecked westbound, landed, and be unable to get back into the air again."

There was sound advice in the field manager's words and Tim realized that it would be folly for him to attempt to fly again that night.

A waiter from the restaurant at the other end of the administration building brought in a tray of steaming hot food and Tim, Hank Cummins, Curly, and Hunter sat down for a midnight lunch.

"There's just one thing I'd like to know," said the ranchman. "What in thunder were you trying to do when you started for the ground all of a sudden. I

was scared half to death and Curly was shouting his prayers."

"To tell the truth I went to sleep," confessed Tim. "When I woke up we were in a power dive and not very far from the ground. I was scared stiff but Lady Luck was with us and the wings stayed on when I pulled the plane out of the dive. Otherwise, we might not be having hot soup right now. And boy, does this soup hit the spot!"

They had nearly finished their lunch when the door opened and the managing editor of the *News* hurried in.

"They phoned me you were coming in a few minutes ago," he told Tim. "How are you? Where's Ralph? Is Lewis all right?"

The flying reporter answered the managing editor's questions as rapidly as possible and then related the events of the day. He introduced the managing editor to Hank Cummins and Curly and told of the important part the Circle Four men had taken in the rescue of the injured pilot.

"That's great work, Tim, great," exclaimed the managing editor. "If Ralph isn't reported by morning you'll want to

start out again. How about writing the story for the *News* before you turn in?"

The lunch and opportunity to relax had restored part of Tim's strength and he was eager to write the story of the day's happenings. It was all fresh and vivid in his mind. If he went to sleep and tried to write the story in the morning part of the dashing action, the brilliant color of the words, would be lost. He agreed to the managing editor's suggestion and sat down at the typewriter in the field manager's office.

With a handful of paper on the desk beside him, he started his story. The other men in the room continued their conversation but they might as well have been in another world as far as Tim was concerned. He was reliving the events of the day, transferring the story of what had happened in the clouds into words and sentences that would thrill the readers of the *News* the next day.

Page after page of copy fell from the machine as Tim's fingers hammered at the keys. The managing editor unobtrusively picked them up and read them with increasing eagerness.

In glowing words Tim painted the story of the entire events of the day from the sudden onslaught of the blizzard to the final landing of his plane on the home field. It was a story high in human interest—a story every subscriber of the *News* would read and remember.

When Tim had completed the last sentence, he turned to the managing editor.

"I'm all in," he admitted, "And if Carl will lend me a cot in the pilot's room I'm going to roll in."

"You deserve a week of sleep," said the managing editor, as he finished reading the story.

"This is one of the best yarns you've ever written," he added enthusiastically. "Now when Ralph gets in and writes his story—"

Carson didn't finish. He saw the look of anxiety that his words brought to Tim's tired, white face and he added quickly.

"You head for bed and we'll let you know just as soon as we hear from Ralph."

Tim nodded dully, almost hopelessly, and stumbled into the pilot's room where he threw himself on a cot. He was asleep before he had time to draw up the blankets.

Half an hour later Tim was roused from his deep slumber by someone shaking his shoulders. Faintly he heard words.

"The pilot on the westbound tonight saw a campfire in the timber along one of the lower mountains. It must be Ralph. We'll start the first thing in the morning."

CHAPTER EIGHT

WHEN Tim and Ralph parted in the foothills of the Great Smokies, Ralph took up his search for George Mitchell, pilot of the missing westbound mail.

Throughout the morning Ralph conducted his fruitless quest and when noon came he was forced to turn back from the mountains and seek a ranch or village where he could refuel his plane. Ralph's ship was slightly smaller than Tim's and consequently had a longer cruising radius with the same fuel load.

Ten miles north of the regular air mail route lay the village of Rubio and Ralph set the mail plane down in a pasture east of the town. The noise of the plane had drawn the attention of the villagers and they swarmed to the field.

Ralph quickly explained his needs and the owner of the village garage brought out a truck loaded with gasoline. Refueling of the mail ship was soon accomplished and Ralph then hastened into the village where he went to the only restaurant and managed

to secure a good, warm meal. He ordered a large lunch prepared and packed and by the time he had finished his dinner the lunch was ready. He paid for the food and walked back to the plane.

Several of the village boys volunteered to hold the wings while Ralph warmed the motor. He gave the new fuel a thorough test and then signalled for the boys to let go.

The propeller sliced through the air and its blast created a small blizzard which hid the crowd of villagers in a smother of snow.

The mail ship gathered momentum, bumped over the uneven ground and finally bounced into the air.

Ralph headed back for the air mail route to resume his search. Back and forth he cruised, confining his search to the foothills of the mountains for there was slight chance that Mitchell would have reached the Great Smokies.

The afternoon wore on and Ralph's hopes of finding the missing flyer that day lessened. It was slow and tedious work cruising over the rolling hills whose slopes were covered by dense growths of trees, principally pines.

If Mitchell had come down in one of the forests it might be weeks before he would be found.

Ralph was speculating on how long his fuel would last when he saw an irregular gash in the tops of the trees ahead. He swung the plane lower. Something had taken off the tops of half a dozen tall, scraggly pines. It looked as though some giant of the sky had paused a moment, swung a mighty sickle, and then gone on.

A quarter of a mile further Ralph saw a repetition of the broken tree tops. Then he caught sight of the missing mail plane. The tail of the ship was sticking straight up in the air; the nose was buried in a deep drift at the base of a mighty pine. The propeller was splintered and the undercarriage gone but otherwise the plane did not appear to have been badly damaged.

Ralph gunned his motor hard and watched for some sign of the pilot near the wrecked plane. For ten minutes he circled the spot before looking for a landing place for his own ship. In one of the valleys between the foothills he found a small meadow that looked as though it would serve as an emergency landing field. He

took careful note of the position of the wrecked plane and then drifted down to attempt the landing.

The meadow was bordered by pines that stuck their spires into the sky and Ralph thought for a time that it would be impossible to avoid their scraggly tops and get into the meadow. He finally found a break in the pines and sideslipped through. Then he straightened out and fishtailed down into the meadow. The pines had protected the meadow from the driving north wind of the night before and the snow had not drifted.

Ralph taxied the mail plane up under the shelter of the trees, lashed it securely, and then prepared for his trip to the wrecked plane.

The young reporter took his package of food he had had prepared at Rubio, ropes and a hand axe and started the climb up the foothills. The snow had drifted but little and he made good progress. In little more than half an hour he reached the scene of the wreck of the air mail.

Ralph shouted lustily, but there was no response. The tail of the big ship was pointing straight into the sky. Ralph

could see that Mitchell was not in the pilot's cockpit.

Then he gasped with astonishment. The door of the mail compartment was open.

Ralph ran across the small clearing and hastily climbed the wings and on up to the mail compartment. One glance was sufficient.

The sack of registered mail was missing!

There was no sign of a struggle at the plane and there was no response to his frantic shouts.

Ralph sat down in the mail cockpit to think things over. His first thought had been that the mail had been robbed. He discarded that belief and decided that Mitchell, possibly unharmed in the crack-up had taken the precious sack of registered mail and was attempting to find his way out of the forest and make for the nearest town.

Ralph dropped down from the fuselage and started a search in the snow. It was light and powdery and had drifted just enough to make the detection of footprints difficult. The reporter made a careful search but it was not until he was on the far side of the plane that his efforts were rewarded.

Footprints, almost concealed by the snow which had fallen later, were dimly visible.

Ralph, eager and alert, took up the trail and soon had lost sight of the wreck of the westbound air mail.

The footprints zig-zagged this way and that for it had been night when Mitchell had deserted the plane and started to make his way out of the forest.

Ralph plowed steadily through the snow. The forest was silent except for the occasional call of a snowbird and Ralph felt a mighty loneliness around him. The shadows were lengthening rapidly and Ralph pushed forward with renewed determination.

At intervals the reporter stopped and listened intently for some sound. It was possible that Mitchell might call for help.

Sundown found the reporter far from the wreck of the air mail, weaving his way along the dim trail. Ralph, although little versed in woodcraft, could read certain signs in the dim footprints. He could see that Mitchell had been tiring rapidly. The steps were more uneven and once or twice the air mail flyer had stopped beside some tree to rest.

The light in the forest was fading rapidly and Ralph advanced as fast as possible. Once he lost the dim trail and had to retrace his steps. He begrudged the lost time and when he found Mitchell's trail started at a dog-trot, but with the coming of the night he was forced to slow down.

The reporter stopped in a small clearing and called lustily through cupped hands. Again and again he shouted and at last he thought he heard a faint reply. Perhaps it was only an echo. He called again and a voice, far away, answered.

Confident that he was near the missing pilot, Ralph hurried forward, bending almost double in order to follow the dim trail. He stopped every few hundred feet and shouted. Each time the reply came clearer and stronger.

Ralph came out on the bank of a small stream. Below, on the rocks beside the creek bed, he saw the crouched form of the air mail flyer.

"George! George!" cried Ralph.

"Down here," came the reply. "Take it easy or you'll slip and twist your ankle just like I did."

In less than a minute Ralph was beside

the man he had been hunting and Mitchell told him of the events preceding the crash and how he had attempted to escape from the forest and reach some habitation.

"The storm struck so quickly I didn't have a chance to escape," said the air mail flyer as Ralph worked over the twisted ankle. "The snow and ice collected on the wings and forced me down. Maybe you saw where I took the tops off the trees before I finally cracked."

"Sure did," said Ralph. "Matter of fact, the only way I found your ship was through seeing those broken tree tops. They gave me the clue that a plane had been in trouble. A little further along I saw the tail of your ship sticking up in the air."

"I took a real flop," went on the mail flyer. "Just nosed right straight down and smacked the old earth. I ducked just in time and outside a few bruises wasn't hurt. Managed to get the sack of registered stuff out and figured I could get out of the woods and reach some ranchhouse or the railroad. Then I fell over this bank, twisted my right ankle, and I've been here ever since."

Ralph chopped some dry wood from a dead tree nearby and soon had a fire blazing merrily among the rocks. He made the mail flyer as comfortable as possible, warmed the lunch he had brought with him and they both enjoyed the meal, the first Mitchell had eaten in twenty-four hours.

After the lunch had been devoured, Ralph turned his attention to the injured ankle. It was a bad wrench but he managed to fix a makeshift bandage that held it firm. After that was done he picked up a blazing piece of firewood and struck out into the night. In a few minutes he was back with a forked branch which he informed Mitchell could be used as a crutch.

Ralph picked up the sack of registered mail and with his assistance Mitchell managed to negotiate the steep slope of the creek valley. When they were in the woods Ralph went back and extinguished the fire.

The reporter returned and helped support the mail flyer as they started the slow and painful journey to the plane which was to be their means of escape.

Mitchell did the best he could but his ankle throbbed incessantly and they were forced to rest every few hundred feet.

After an hour and a half of the gruelling work, Mitchell was exhausted and Ralph decided that it would be best for them to wait until morning before continuing their journey.

He selected a clearing which had only one large tree in the center. Brushing away the snow he cut enough pine branches for a makeshift bed and then constructed a barrier of branches to shield them from the wind.

A fire was started and Mitchell, weak and chilled from his exertions, laid down beside it. Ralph massaged the swollen ankle until the pain had eased and the mail flyer fell asleep.

The reporter busied himself securing enough firewood to last until morning and after that task was completed laid down beside Mitchell in the fragrant pine bows. He dropped into a deep sleep of exhaustion and had slept for some time when he awoke with a terrifying fear gripping his heart.

Blazing eyes were staring at him from

the edge of the forest; eyes that burned their way into his mind. A whole ring of them were closing in, creeping ever nearer the fire.

For a moment the terror of the situation held Ralph motionless. Then he leaped into action.

The fire had died low but there was still a few burning embers. He seized the ends of several of these and hurled them toward the hungry eyes.

The flaming brands made fiery arcs through the night. Some of them dropped sizzling into the snow; others struck dark bodies.

Hoarse cries shattered the midnight stillness as the wolves fled before Ralph's sudden attack. In a second it was over and when Mitchell wanted to know what had happened, Ralph felt as though he had been dreaming.

"Wolves were closing in on us when I woke up," he explained. "For a minute I was too scared to do anything. Then I remembered that they were afraid of fire and I hurled half a dozen embers from our campfire at them."

"I never thought of wolves," said the

mail flyer. "Good thing you woke up or we might have become 'A Great Mystery' or some such thing. It wouldn't take those timber wolves long to finish a fellow."

Ralph agreed that the wolves were dangerous and piled new fuel on the fire.

Mitchell still had his heavy service automatic and Ralph appropriated the weapon.

The bright light from the fire kept Ralph awake for a time but after an hour and a half of struggling against fatigue his eyes closed.

Stealthy movements in the forest failed to arouse him and slinking figures emerged from the timber. The wolves were advancing again.

A dozen of the hungry, grey beasts of prey crept nearer and nearer the fire. In an ever narrowing circle they closed in upon their victims, treading lightly lest they make some noise.

Mitchell, exhausted from his long battle through the snow and the pain of his injured ankle, was breathing deeply.

The reporter had fallen asleep sitting up and his head was bent forward as though he was in thought. In his right hand was the heavy .45 caliber automatic.

Closer and closer came the wolves.

Forty feet.

The fire crackled as it bit into a pine knot and the beasts stopped their advance. But Ralph failed to wake up and the deadly circle drew nearer to the little camp in the center of the clearing.

Thirty feet.

Mitchell stirred restlessly and then relapsed into the deep sleep that claimed him.

Another moment and the wolves would spring, their glistening, bared teeth ripping at their victims. They crept closer, crouched for the fatal spring.

The fire was lower, its light making only a dim glow, and through this could be seen the bright eyes of the wolves.

From the heavens came the deep thunder of the motor of the westbound mail. Its echoes filled the night and Ralph awakened instantly.

The wolves, startled by the sudden burst of sound, were motionless.

In the brief second before they leaped, Ralph threw his body across Mitchell to shield the injured flyer from the savage onslaught.

The automatic in his hand blazed, shattering the darkness with shafts of flame.

Bullets thudded into the gray shapes which swirled around the dim campfire.

A huge timber wolf landed on top of Ralph. He felt its hot breath, heard the throaty growl of triumph, felt the muzzle seek his throat.

With desperate effort and strength born of terror, Ralph pressed the muzzle of the automatic against the shaggy grey fur. The shock of the heavy bullet distracted the wolf and it ceased its efforts to kill Ralph and slunk into the shadows.

The reporter crouched over Mitchell, waiting for more onslaughts. The wolf cries continued and Ralph put more fuel on the fire.

In the light from the leaping flames he saw the explanation. His first bullets had brought down two of the huge beasts and their companions, scenting the fresh blood, had turned from their attack and were tearing the stricken wolves to pieces.

Mitchell handed a fresh clip of cartridges to Ralph and the reporter sent another hail of lead in the direction of the wolves.

Fresh cries of pain filled the night but it was not until Ralph had brought down two more of the great beasts that the others slunk away and disappeared in the timber.

"How did they happen to get so close?" Mitchell asked.

"I must have fallen asleep," admitted Ralph. "First thing I heard was the roar of the westbound plane going over and then I saw a whole circle of hungry eyes looking at us. They were crouched, ready to spring, when the sound of the plane distracted them. It gave me just time enough to get into action with the gun."

"Good thing you did or all that would have been left of us by morning would be soup bones," grinned Mitchell. "I've had all the thrills I want for one night. I'm not going to risk going to sleep again."

The reporter and the mail flyer sat up and talked for the remainder of the night.

At the first lightening of the sky, they resumed their journey toward the plane. In the clearing they left the bodies of four wolves and further along the trail they found the body of a fifth, the one which had leaped upon Ralph.

They finally reached the wreck of the mail plane and continued until they came to the clearing where Ralph had left his ship.

"Not any too much room to get out of this pocket," commented Mitchell as he surveyed the tall pines which enclosed the valley.

"I had to fish tail in and dodge a few trees doing it," replied Ralph. "But if I got in I guess I'll be able to get out all right."

Mitchell rested in the snow while Ralph unlashed the plane and turned it around. Then the reporter boosted the flyer into the mail cockpit and prepared for the take-off. He primed the motor and felt that luck was with him when it started easily.

Mitchell leaned out of the mail cockpit and shouted back at Ralph.

"I know this ship," he cried. "Let her get a good run. Then pull back hard and she'll climb almost straight up. Don't hold her in a climb for more than two hundred feet or she may slip back on back and go into a tail spin."

Ralph nodded his thanks and made a final check to see that the plane was ready for the attempt to get out of the valley.

Tall pines loomed on every side. Straight ahead there was a slight break in the tree tops he hoped to be able to slide through. It would require skilful piloting but they had passed through so many ordeals in the last few hours that Ralph felt himself capable of meeting the emergency.

The reporter leaned ahead and tapped Mitchell on the shoulder.

"All set?" he asked.

Mitchell nodded.

"Then hang on," cried Ralph and he opened the throttle and sent the plane skimming through the snow.

The barrier of pines rose ahead of the propeller. Ralph waited until the last second and then jerked the stick back. The wheels lifted off the ground and the ship flashed into the air.

It was going to be close but it looked like they would clear the trees and wing their way eastward in safety. Ralph whipped the plane through the narrow opening in the tree tops. They were almost clear when one wing brushed the snow-burdened tips of the pine. It was just enough to throw the plane out of balance. They lost speed and the nose started down.

Ralph had visions of being impaled on the tops of the trees and he worked frantically to right the plane. Lower and lower they slipped. Then the motor overcame the pull of gravity and they resumed their climb. Two tall trees barred their way and Ralph banked sharply.

There was a sudden jar as though some giant had reached up to pluck the plane from the sky. Then it was over and they were soaring towards the clouds.

Mitchell, who had been watching their progress, relaxed and slumped down into the mail cockpit.

Ralph, perplexed by the last jarring sensation as they cleared the final barrier, wondered what had happened to the ship. The wing tips had not been damaged and the tail assembly was all right.

Determined to find out what had taken place, Ralph leaned far out of the cockpit in order to see the landing gear. One glance was sufficient. The left wheel had been smashed.

Ralph slid back into his seat and gave his attention to the handling of the plane. He had more than an hour in which to decide how he would land at Atkinson.

The sky cleared and the sun peeped over the horizon. The last snow of winter would soon be little more than a memory but it would be a bitter one for the air mail with two planes wrecked.

Atkinson was just waking up when Ralph roared over and circled the airport. He swooped low to attract attention and first on the field was Tim, who had been awakened by the sound of the plane.

"One wheel of Ralph's ship is smashed!" cried Hunter.

"And I'll bet he hasn't got a whole lot of gas left," said Tim.

"What will we do?" asked Carson, who had returned to the field.

"Take a wheel up to him," replied Tim.

Turning to the field manager, he asked, "Have you got a spare wheel that will fit that ship?"

"Two of them," said Hunter. "I'll have them in in less than a minute." He hastened to the parts room and returned with a spare wheel. Together they ran to hangar No. 5 which was the home of the *Good News*. The plane, repainted and with its motor and rigging carefully checked, was ready to go again.

"You handle the controls," Tim told Hunter, "and I'll do the plane changing stunt."

Hunter warmed up the *Good News* and Tim secured the extra equipment he needed. He tossed a coil of rope into the forward cockpit and put an assortment of wrenches of various sizes into the pockets of his tight-fitting leather jacket. Then he vaulted into the cockpit and signalled for Hunter to open the throttle.

The *Good News* flipped through the open door of the hangar, made a short run, and then, its powerful motor thrumming steadily, nosed skyward in a steep climb.

Hunter took the *Good News* alongside the slower mail plane and Tim signalled to Ralph what he intended to attempt. Mitchell, who was now aware of the danger of their situation, was watching anxiously from the mail cockpit of Ralph's plane. Himself an expert flier, he was fuming impatiently at his helplessness.

Hunter and Ralph coordinated the speed of their planes and Hunter gradually edged over the other plane.

Tim made one end of the rope fast to the cockpit and to the other he tied the

spare wheel. He lowered the wheel over the side of the fuselage and slowly let it down until it was just above Mitchell. The mail flyer reached up and took the wheel, untying the rope to which it had been fastened.

Then Tim pulled the rope back, knotted it in half a dozen places, and tossed it overboard again.

"Take it easy," he warned Hunter as he unfolded his long legs and eased them over the side of the cockpit. The air was cold and clinging to a swaying rope one thousand feet above the ground while traveling ninety miles an hour was no picnic. Little by little Tim slid down the swaying rope.

Ralph watched the controls of his plane like a hawk, creeping nearer and nearer to Tim.

The gap between Tim and the upper wing of the mail plane lessened—almost vanished. Then the flying reporter let go and sprawled on the wing, his hands clutching the forward wing.

The drop had knocked the breath from his body and he gasped painfully. After a short rest he felt his strength returning and started edging toward the center of the

ship. Ralph held the plane steady and Tim made good progress. In less than five minutes he was in the mail cockpit with Mitchell.

In a few words the injured pilot told Tim what had happened, of his own crash and attempt to get out of the timber with the registered mail, how Ralph had found him and later fought off the wolves and how they had smashed a wheel in getting clear of the trees surrounding the valley.

Tim told Mitchell that he had found Lewis, the other missing pilot, and brought him safely to Atkinson. That done, Tim took the wheel and slide out of the cockpit and down on to the landing gear.

The axel was only slightly bent and was still strong enough to stand the strain of landing in the snow. Tim worked hard to get the lock nut off the smashed wheel for it had jammed. He finally worked it loose and then dropped the damaged wheel on to the flying field far below.

The new wheel slid into place and he managed to get the lock nut on. The wheel wobbled a little but it would permit Ralph to land in safety.

Tim clambered back into the mail cock-

pit and motioned for Ralph to land. The pilot brought the mail ship down to an easy landing and taxied up to the row of hangars where they were met by the impatient managing editor.

A photographer was waiting and he snapped half a dozen pictures as Ralph and Tim helped Mitchell from the plane.

The flyer was sent in to town for treatment at a hospital and Tim and Ralph accompanied the managing editor to the *News* office.

"Don't you want something to eat?" asked Carson as they reached the office.

"I'll wait," grinned Ralph. "If I eat now I'll go to sleep and you'll never wake me up. I'll write the story first and eat afterward."

CHAPTER NINE

THE afternoon editions of the *News* that day featured the stories Tim and Ralph had written of their adventures in rescuing the air mail pilots. Pictures of Ralph's plane landing and of Ralph and Tim helping George Mitchell were spread all over the second page.

But long before the presses started their daily run Tim was in the air again, refreshed by at least part of a night's sleep. Ralph, exhausted by his adventures and lack of sleep, went to bed as soon as he finished writing his story.

After returning to the airport, Tim prepared to take his cowboy friends back to the Circle Four Ranch.

Hank Cummins, the owner of the Circle Four, was waiting for Tim at the field.

"Just had a telephone call from the ranch," he said, "And by the time we get there they'll have the mail down where we can pick it up."

"That will be fine," exclaimed Tim. "I'll have it back here by late afternoon."

Tim warmed up the *Good News* and motioned for the ranchman and Curly to climb into the forward cockpit.

"Better strap yourselves in," he warned them. "This ship steps out and we're going places. If we happen to hit some rough air you'll think you're riding a bronco."

Curly grinned as though he thought Tim was joking but the flying reporter insisted that the cowboy strap himself in the plane.

The *Good News* was pulsating with power and Tim decided to give his new friends a thrill or two.

He opened the throttle and the plane dusted down the field like a scared jackrabbit. Tim pulled back hard on the stick and the powerful motor took them almost straight into the sky. Up and up they spiraled, clawing for altitude and getting it by leaps and bounds.

Five hundred, seven-fifty, one thousand, fifteen hundred and then two thousand. They were flashing away from the earth at a dizzying pace. When the plane was about the two thousand foot level, Tim levelled off and headed in the direction of the Circle Four.

The air speed indicator started to climb. There was a favoring wind to boost them along and the needle advanced steadily. They breezed along at a hundred and eighty miles an hour and when Tim pushed the speed up to one hundred and ninety miles an hour Curly turned around. His face was white and scared looking. He motioned for Tim to slow down and the flying reporter shut off the motor.

"I don't want to get home in a minute," yelled the cowboy. "Take your time, take your time. All I've got to do when we get home is chase cows."

Tim grinned and shook his head.

"You haven't seen anything yet," he cried. "If you thing a horse can buck, watch this."

The flying reporter switched on the motor again and fed fuel into the white-hot cylinders. Their speed increased until they were flashing through the sky at two hundred and five miles an hour. Curly and Hank Cummins were clinging to the combing of the front cockpit, their knuckles white from the desperation of their grip.

Tim eased up on the throttle and slowed down to the sedate pace of one hundred and

fifty miles an hour. Curly and Hank settled down in their seats, only to lose their hats when Tim swung the *Good News* into a loop. From that he dropped into a falling leaf and ended up by flying upside down.

"Can a bronco do stunts like that?" asked Tim when the *Good News* was again on an even line of flight.

"One or two," Curly managed to say, "But they can't buck upside down for that long a time. Take me home. I'll be glad to get out of this sky horse."

The *Good News* fairly snapped the miles out of its exhaust and it was only a short time after they had left the field at Atkinson when Tim brought the plane to rest in the meadow below the ranch buildings.

Boots and Jim were waiting for him with the sacks of mail they had taken from the wreckage of Lewis' plane in the Great Smokies.

Tim checked the sacks.

"Every one of them here and nothing damaged," he said. "By night they'll be on their way east again by air mail."

Hank Cummins urged him to go to the ranch house for a warm lunch, but Tim refused the invitation.

"Then pay us a visit this summer when you have your vacation," insisted the owner of the Circle Four. "Come out here with the boys. They'll teach you how to ride and rope and maybe do a little fancy shooting. There's good fishing in the streams back in the hills and maybe, if the rustling that started last summer keeps on, you might run into a little excitement."

"In that case," smiled Tim, "I wouldn't be surprised if you had a couple of reporters spending their vacations with you this summer."

"Nothing would please me more," said the genial ranchman, "and be sure and drop in whenever you fly this way."

"Thanks for all you've done," said Tim, "and if we can ever do you a favor, don't hesitate to call on us."

With the air mail pouches in the forward cockpit Tim headed the *Good News* for home. The headwind slowed him somewhat but even with that handicap he was back in Atkinson by midafternoon.

A special section of the air mail eastbound had just come in and the salvage mail was placed aboard it to continue the journey to eastern cities.

When the air mail had taken off, Hunter turned to Tim.

"I'm writing a complete report and forwarding it to headquarters," said the field manager. "It was certainly great of you and Ralph to help out as you did. Lewis might have died and Mitchell certainly would have had a rough time of it before we could have reached them if you fellows hadn't volunteered."

"We're always ready in an emergency," said Tim. "Besides, we got some dandy stories for the paper."

"The company will reward you in some way," said Hunter, "And they won't be stingy about it when they read my report."

"Don't lay it on too thick," urged Tim.

"Not very much," grinned Hunter as he went into his office.

Tim was about to leave the field when Hunter called that he was wanted on the phone. When Tim answered he recognized the voice of Captain Ned Raymond of the state police.

"I'd like to see you at the Hotel Jefferson right away. Same room as before," said the Captain.

"I'm just starting for town," replied

Tim. "I'll be there in fifteen or twenty minutes."

Captain Raymond was pacing up and down the narrow confines of room 309 when Tim entered.

"Glad to see you again, Murphy," said the state police official. "Sit down," and he waved toward the bed.

Captain Raymond continued his pacing, chewing nervously at the end of a heavy pencil.

"Trouble brewing," he said in the sharp, short way of his. "Got a tip from Chicago today. We'll have to keep a sharp lookout."

"Just what for?" asked Tim.

"That's it, that's it," exploded the fiery policeman. "If I knew where to look, but I don't."

"Then we'll have to sit back and wait for something to happen," said Tim.

"But keep our eyes open," added Captain Raymond. "My tip is that some of the members of the Sky Hawk's gang have worked out a new scheme of some kind and are planning a lot of robberies. Going to make a wholesale business out of it. Our part of the country has been picked

first because it will be easy for them to make a getaway. The mountains west of here, the river east. Good hiding for anyone who is evading the law."

Tim waited while Captain Raymond continued his pacing of the room.

"You have that plane of yours ready to go at a minute's notice," said the trooper.

"It's always ready," replied Tim, "For we never know just when a big story will break and we'll need the plane."

"Good, good. And have no fear but what you'll get all the excitement you want in a short time."

"I've had about all I want for a while," smiled Tim and he told of what he and Ralph had gone through in the rescue of the air mail flyers.

"That's the stuff," explained Captain Raymond. "You boys are just the types we need. I know I can count on you to come through in an emergency. Guess that's all for this time. I just wanted to warn you to expect trouble soon. If you want to get in touch with me at any time telephone the troop barracks at Harris. If I'm not there, they'll know where to locate me within a few minutes."

When Tim left the hotel it was with the knowledge that he would soon be in conflict with members of the Sky Hawk's old band. He knew they would be formidable foes but there was no fear in his heart.

The flying reporter returned to the *News* office and started writing his aviation column for the following day. He was tired and made slow progress, but he had a little more than a column of material ready when he closed his desk at six o'clock.

Dan Watkins, the head of the copy desk and one of Tim's closest friends, was waiting for him.

"Where are you going to eat tonight?" asked the copy chief.

"Anyplace where it is quiet," replied Tim. "My head feels a little light."

"Then some clam chowder could just about hit the spot with you," suggested Watkins and they left the *News* building and walked to a small, cozy restaurant on a nearby sidestreet. The quiet and the soft lights eased Tim's taught nerves and he felt his whole body relaxing.

"You've had some mighty busy days," commented Watkins when they were comfortably seated.

"Busy but lots of fun," replied Tim.

"How about the chances you've been taking?"

"They weren't chances," said the flying reporter. "I always had a sturdy plane and I tried to use good judgment. Once or twice, I'll admit that I took chances but in those cases the object far surpassed the risk."

"I heard the business manager and the managing editor talking about you today," said Watkins.

"Isn't my work up to standard?" asked Tim.

"It wasn't about your work it was about you."

"What do you mean?"

"Both of them are worried about your health. They are afraid you're working too hard and when the managing editor and the business manager start to worry about your health you can bet your bottom dollar you're valuable to the paper. With me, I could have a nervous breakdown and they'd never bat an eye. Probably be glad to get rid of me."

"Don't talk like that, Dan," pleaded Tim. "You know that's not so. Why

you're the balance wheel of the editorial office. Carson wouldn't know what to do if anything happened to you. He depends on you to keep things running smoothly, see that the boys all cover their assignments and that the copy goes steadily to the machines."

"We won't argue over that," smiled the copy chief, "But you should have heard those two going at it this afternoon. The business manager fairly ripped into Carson."

"What for?"

"For letting you be sworn into the state police."

"You know that!"

"Of course."

"But how?"

"It's my business to know things like that. Anyway, the business manager said the state police could take care of themselves and that you were too valuable for the paper to lose. He said that hundreds of people took the *News* just to read about the adventures you and Ralph go through."

"What did Carson say?" asked Tim.

"Oh he explained what the state troopers were up against and they had it hot and

heavy for a while. All of which gets back to what I wanted to say to you. Be careful, Tim, on this state police job. The troopers are paid to take chances with criminals; you're not. Help them where you can but don't risk your own life unnecessarily."

"I don't intend to take unnecessary risks," said Tim, "but you know how I feel about crime. Anything I can do to stop it or, after it is committed, to bring the criminals to justice, I'll do."

"I realize that, Tim, and I admire you for it," said Watkins. "All I ask is that you be careful. The *News* has done a great deal for you and it will do a great deal more if you give it a chance."

Routine work filled the next ten days and there was no further news from Captain Raymond of the state police. The warm winds of spring swept in from the south and the last traces of the late winter blizzard disappeared. The grass sprang up and the trees started to leaf.

During the lunch hour the reporters gathered on the south side of the *News* building to exchange yarns and gossip. Gray skies of winter had been replaced by the cheerful ones of spring and life on the

paper moved smoothly. The menace of the Sky Hawk's gang had almost been forgotten when Tim was given an assignment that was to lead to many a strange and thrilling adventure.

CHAPTER TEN

WHEN Tim returned to the editorial room after lunch that day the managing editor summoned him to his office.

"I've got an assignment that is somewhat different from your usual run of things," explained Carson, "but I'm sure you'll enjoy it. The Southwestern railroad is speeding up the time of its midnight mail. The new schedule calls for an average speed of fifty-one miles an hour. The superintendent of this division has invited me to send a reporter on the first trip tonight. How would you like to ride the cab of the mail down to Vinton?"

"I'd like it, Mr. Carson," replied Tim. "I've always wanted to ride in the cab of a fast train."

"You'll have your chance tonight," smiled the managing editor, "for if I know anything about train schedules the mail is going to throw the miles up her stack when she hits her stride."

Carson telephoned the railroad offices that Tim would ride the cab that night.

"You'd better go down to the station about eleven o'clock," said the managing editor. "You'll get your pass at the ticket office. Then go down to the roundhouse and get aboard the engine there. The engineer and conductor will be expecting you. This is quite an event for the railroad people and I want to give them a good yarn. I'll send Ralph to Vinton this afternoon in the *Good News* and he'll wait there and bring you home in the morning. One of the staff photographers will be at the station to take flash-lights when the mail pulls out."

"I'll finish my aviation column for tomorrow," said Tim, "and then get some old clothes for I don't imagine it will be any too clean on the engine."

When Ralph returned from an assignment he was told to take the *Good News* and fly to Vinton, there to await the arrival of Tim on the midnight mail.

Tim accompanied his flying companion to the airport and helped him wheel the *Good News* out of the hangar.

"Traveling on a train will seem kind of slow compared to the *Good News*," suggested Ralph.

"I don't know about that," replied Tim. "The mail's new schedule is a hair raiser and they'll have to pound the steel pretty hard to make their time. It won't be any picnic, I can tell you that."

Ralph, satisfied that the motor was thoroughly warm and ready for its task, waved at Tim.

"See you in the morning," he called. Then he whipped the *Good News* across the field and streaked into the southwest.

Tim watched the plane until it disappeared before he turned to the car which had brought them from town. On his way back to the city he drove leisurely, thoroughly enjoying the sweetness of the spring afternoon.

The road swung onto a viaduct that spanned the myriad rails of the Southwestern. A transcontinental limited was pulling into the long station, feathery puffs of steam drifting away from the safety valve. The train came to a stop, porters swung their stools down on the platform and the passengers descended. The engineer dropped down from the cab and started oiling around the iron speedster of the rails.

There was something thrilling, fascinating about it and Tim looked forward with high interest to his trip that night. He drove on up town, returning the car to the garage.

After dinner alone he walked to his room, found a suit of coveralls and an old cap and bandanna handkerchief. These he rolled up and wrapped in paper. That done he sat down for an hour of reading the latest aviation journals and at eight o'clock he set his alarm clock for ten-thirty and laid down for a nap.

The next thing Tim knew the alarm was ringing steadily and he roused himself from the deep sleep into which he had fallen. He washed his face and hands in cold water and felt greatly refreshed, ready for whatever the night might have in store in the way of adventure.

On the way to the station Tim stopped at an all night restaurant and enjoyed a platter of delicious country sausage. Then he continued his walk toward the railroad yards.

The reporter descended the steps from the viaduct and entered the brightly lighted station. It was two minutes to eleven when

he walked up to the ticket window and introduced himself. The agent on duty handed him his credentials and told him the shortest way to the roundhouse.

Tim left the station and its glow of light. Outside the night air was cool and he pulled his leather jacket closer around him. Great arc lights gleamed at intervals in the yard and a chugging switch engine disturbed the quiet.

Three blocks from the station was the roundhouse with its countless chimneys and numberless doors. Tim picked his way carefully over the switches, skirted the yawning pit that marked the turn-table and entered the master mechanic's office at the roundhouse.

The master mechanic, old Tom Johnson, was checking over the schedule of the mail with Fred Henshaw, who was to pull the mail.

"What do you want?" growled Johnson when he saw Tim standing in the doorway.

"I'm from the *News*," replied Tim. "The superintendent wanted a reporter to ride the mail tonight."

"What's your name?" asked the master mechanic.

"Tim Murphy."

"Oh, so you're the flying reporter," smiled Johnson as he got out of his chair and shook hands with Tim. "I've read a lot about you. Glad to know you. Meet Fred Henshaw. He'll give you a few thrills tonight."

Tim and the engineer shook hands.

"We won't go as fast as you do by plane," smiled the engineer, "But we'll go places."

"I'm looking forward to the trip," said Tim. "It will be a real experience."

The telephone rang and the master mechanic answered.

"The dispatcher says the mail will be in on the advertised," he said. "That gives us a break for the test run."

Henshaw nodded and motioned for Tim to accompany him into the roundhouse.

Electric lights high up under the roof tried vainly to pierce the shadows which shrouded the hulking monsters of the rails as they rested in their stalls. There must have been fourteen or fifteen locomotives in the roundhouse, some of them dead; others breathing slowly and rhythmically, awaiting their turn to be called for service on the road.

At the far end of the roundhouse there was a glare of light as hostlers finished grooming the 1064 for its run that night on the mail.

The 1064 was the latest thing the Southwestern boasted in the way of fast-passenger motive power. It was capable of hauling sixteen all-steel Pullmans at seventy miles an hour and was as sleek and trim as a greyhound.

The engineer took his torch and made a final inspection to be sure that everything was in readiness for the test run. Then he extinguished the torch, threw it up into the cab, and motioned for Tim to follow him.

The little engineer scrambled up the steps and swung into the cab. Tim followed but with not nearly as much grace.

The fireman was busy with a long firehook and the glow from the open door of the firebox lighted the cab with a ruddy brilliance. When the iron doors of the firebox slammed shut and the fireman straightened up, the engineer introduced his fireman, Harry Benson.

Introductions completed, the engine crew fixed a place for Tim on the seat behind the engineer.

Henshaw looked at his watch. It was eleven forty-five. He stuck his head out the window and looked at the turn-table. It had been swung into place ready for the 1064 to steam out of the house.

Harry Benson started the bell ringer, Henshaw released the air and opened the throttle a notch. The 1064 came to life, steam hissed from its cylinders, the drivers quivered and moved slowly in the reverse motion. The 1064 slid out of the roundhouse, rocked a little as it went over the turn-table and then eased down the darkened yards until it came to a stop near the end of the long train shed.

At eleven-fifty a penetrating whistle came through the night to be followed several minutes later by the blazing headlight of the westbound mail.

The long string of mail cars came to a halt in front of the station, the engine which had brought them in was cut off, and steamed down the yard on its way to the roundhouse. A lantern at the head end of the mail signalled for the 1064 to back down and Henshaw set the engine in motion again.

With a delicate handling of the air he

nosed the tender of the 1064 against the head mail car. The work of coupling the engine to the train was a matter of seconds. Then Henshaw tested the air. It worked perfectly and the midnight mail was ready to continue its westward race across the continent.

The interior of the cab was lighted by a green-shaded bulb just above the gauges on the boiler. The sides were in the shadows and there was no reflection to bother the engineer as he stared into the night.

The conductor ran forward along the train and handed a sheaf of order tissues into the cab. Henshaw and his fireman read them together to make sure that they understood every order.

"Slow order for that new bridge at Raleigh is going to hurt," was the only comment the engineer made as he climbed back on his box.

Mail trucks rumbled along the platform as extra crews hastened the work of unloading and loading the mail. Then they were through. The mail was ready for the open steel.

The conductor's lantern at the back end of the train flashed in the "high ball" and

Henshaw answered with two short, defiant blasts of the whistle.

The engineer dusted the rails with sand, opened the throttle, and the 1064 settled down to its night's work. With nine steel cars of mail to hold it down, the giant engine plunged out of the yards.

Over the switches they clattered, the cab rocking and reeling as they struck the frogs. They had a straight shot through the yards to the main line and Henshaw wasted no time in getting the 1064 into its stride.

They flashed past the outer signal towers and now only two twin ribbons of steel lay ahead of them. The mail was speeding down the right-hand westbound track. They would meet the eastbound trains coming down the left-hand pair of rails.

The needle on the speed indicator mounted steadily as Henshaw opened the throttle notch by notch. The 1064's exhaust was a steady, deafening volley that made conversation impossible.

Block signals popped up in the searching rays of the headlight to disappear in the thunder of the train almost before Tim had time to read their signals. But the

engineer saw them all and knew that the steel highway ahead of him was clear.

Harry Benson was busy feeding the fire. He swayed to and fro in the glare from the open firebox. First to the tender, then to the cab with a scoop of coal, then back to the tender for more coal.

By the time the mail was five miles out of Atkinson, Henshaw had the 1064 near the peak of its stride. They were rolling down the line at better than seventy miles an hour. It was a dizzy pace and the cab rocked and rolled over the steel.

Tim marveled at the easy grace of the fireman as he swung back and forth between the cab and the tender, feeding great shovels of coal into the hungry firebox.

The mail flashed through sleeping villages and past darkened farmhouses. The country through which they were speeding was sparsely settled and there were few grade crossings. Only occasionally did Henshaw reach for the whistle cord and send a sharp warning into the night.

Raleigh was their first scheduled stop and five miles this side of the city they slid down into a valley where a roaring

stream rushed under the rails. A repair crew had been strengthening the bridge and had not quite completed their work. As a result the dispatcher had put out a slow order which called for a speed not in excess of thirty miles an hour over the bridge. Henshaw glanced at his watch and grumbled to himself as he pinched the mail down to comply with the orders. The air brakes ground hard on the wheels and Tim looked back at the train. Sparks were flying from every truck, cascading in showers along the right-of-way.

They rumbled over the bridge and Henshaw opened up again. Every minute counted and he rolled the mail into Raleigh at a lively clip.

There was no need to handle the mail as he would a crack transcontinental limited with extra fare passengers and a diner full of chinaware and Henshaw whipped the mail into the station and ground her down hard. They stopped with a jerk that jarred every bone in Tim's body.

The doors of the mail cars were rolled open and the crew started tossing the pouches. Henshaw picked up his torch, lighted it, and dropped down to oil around

while Benson pulled the spout down from the nearby water tank and gave the engine a drink.

High speed means lots of steam and steam means water and more water. Hundreds of gallons gushed into the tank on the tender and the fireman had just completed his task when they got the highball. He was still on top of the tender when Henshaw cracked his throttle and started the mail on another leg of its fast run.

The fireman scrambled down off the swaying tender, opened the firebox, and started throwing in coal like a man possessed. There was a slight grade out of the station at Raleigh and the laboring exhaust fairly pulled the fire out the stack.

Once over the grade the 1064 hit her stride and they rolled away along the foothills of the Great Smokies. This particular main stem of the Southwestern ran through the foothills for several hundred miles, finally finding a pass through which the rails continued their journey to the coast.

The running would be more precarious now and there was only one more stop and

that for water at the village of Tanktown, a hamlet where a few railroad men made their home.

Tim was fascinated by the precision with which the great locomotive worked, with the confidence the engineer displayed in its handling and with the dexterity of the fireman as he fed fuel to the firebox.

On and on rushed the mail, the speed never under sixty miles an hour and sometimes well over seventy. Just before they plunged into the foothills they struck a stretch of ten miles of almost straight track with only one or two gentle grades.

Henshaw yelled at his fireman and Benson grinned and motioned for the engineer to open the throttle. The bar went back into the last notch and Tim felt the engine pulsate with new power. The needle on the speed indicator climbed to seventy-five and kept on. It paused at eighty and then went on up to eighty-three. They were bouncing around in the cab when the little air whistle which the conductor uses in signalling the engine peeped.

Henshaw waited until the conductor had signalled several times before he eased off on the throttle and they dropped down to

the slow pace of sixty-five miles an hour.

"I guess we gave the boys behind a thrill," yelled Henshaw and the fireman nodded as he straightened up to rest his weary muscles.

Once in the foothills where the grades were frequent and the curves tighter, their speed dropped below sixty miles an hour.

When they stopped at Tanktown for coal and water, they were seven minutes ahead of their schedule and Henshaw took ample time to touch up the journals and bearings of the great engine with liberal doses of oil.

The conductor ran forward.

"What's the idea," he demanded. "Were you trying to put us all in the ditch?"

"Keep cool, keep cool," grinned Henshaw. "Our orders were to make time and we made it."

"Our orders didn't call for eighty-three miles an hour," sputtered the trainman. "Next time you try a stunt like that I'll pull the air on you."

"You'll lose time if you do," smiled the engineer. "You sit back in your mail cars and I'll do the worrying about keeping the train on the rails."

The fireman yelled that he was ready to go. Henshaw looked at his watch and climbed into the cab.

The whistle blasted two short, sharp calls and the flagman on the back end swung aboard. The mail sped on the last lap of its inaugural run on the new schedule.

Mile after mile disappeared behind the red lights of the last car. They were less than forty miles from the end of the division when they swung around a curve to see the rails ahead of them disappear in an inferno of flame.

Henshaw jammed on the air and leaned far out of the cab. Tim dropped down in the gangway and looked ahead. A small patch of timber through which the right-of-way passed was on fire, and a wall of flame barred their way.

The engineer pinched his train down to a stop about two hundred yards from the burning timber. Even at that distance they could hear the roar of the flames and feel the heat from the cauldron of fire.

"Looks like this is the end of your run," said Tim.

"Don't know," replied the engineer. "We might make it."

"Going to try and run the fire?" asked the fireman.

"Orders say to get the mail through to the west end on time," said the engineer, "And orders are orders. What say, boys?"

"I say yes," grinned the fireman. "The steel ought to hold us and we can coast through without much push or pull on the rails."

"I'm riding the mail," said Tim when the engineer turned to him.

"Then here we go," decided Henshaw. He threw over the reverse lever and started backing away from the flames. When the 1064 was a mile from the burning timber he brought the train to a stop.

Mail clerks and trainmen had their heads out the doors, wondering what the engineer was going to do.

The conductor hurried up.

"We'll have to stay here," he told the engineer.

"Stay here? Well, I guess not," replied Henshaw. "Orders say 'on time' at the west end. If you're going to stay with this train, swing on and make it snappy. We're going to run for it."

The conductor protested but the engi-

neer set his train in motion and the conductor finally swung on one of the mail cars and climbed inside.

The 1064 picked up speed rapidly and they rolled down on the fire.

"Duck down behind the boiler when I yell," said the engineer and Tim and the fireman nodded that they understood.

The distance between the pilot and the flames was decreasing rapidly. Tim slid off the box behind the engineer and clung to one side of the cab. The world ahead was a wall of fire that leaped toward the heavens. Tim heard the engineer yell and he ducked behind the head of the boiler.

The engine swayed sickeningly but held to the steel. There was the roar of the fire, the stifling heat that seemed to sear its way into his lungs, hot brands filled the cab and he felt his hair scorching in the terrific heat. Then the engine stumbled onto cool steel and they were through the burning timber and into the cool night air again.

Tim shook the cinders from his hair and straightened up. He looked for the engineer and found Henshaw industriously beating out tongues of flame which were

licking around the window. Between flailing his arms at the fire he would stop momentarily to widen out on the throttle as the 1064 swung into her stride again.

The reporter turned to the fireman's side of the cab. Benson was missing.

With a cry of alarm, Tim summoned the engineer from his side of the cab.

"The fireman's gone!" he cried.

Both of them felt the hand of death grip at their hearts. Perhaps a lurch of the cab had thrown Benson out and into the flaming woods. There would have been no chance for his survival and they looked at each other with horror written in their faces.

The shock of the sudden tragedy left Tim speechless and the engineer climbed slowly back to his throttle. There was no joy in the cab of the 1064 over their victory with the flames for Henshaw had lost the best fireman he had ever had.

Tim was used to sudden shocks but the one of turning to look for the fireman and finding him gone was one that would remain with him through life.

The needle on the steam gauge wavered and started down as the 1064 made its

heavy demands for power. Someone must keep the fire hot.

Henshaw glanced anxiously at his watch.

"We're right on the dot now," he shouted at Tim. "If you can throw the black diamonds for about thirty minutes we'll go into the west end on time."

"I'll do my best," shouted Tim above the noise of the madly working machinery.

A foot lever which operated a small steam engine opened the door of the firebox and Tim stepped on the lever. The heavy iron doors swung open and he looked into a white-hot pit. The fire was thin in spots and he picked up Benson's scoop, set his legs for the pitch and roll of the cab, and swung a scoop of coal into the firebox. The first one went where he intended it but on the second attempt they struck a tight curve and most of the coal went up the engineer's neck.

Henshaw laughed.

"Better luck next time," he shouted encouragingly.

Tim took a fresh grip on the scoop and in less than five minutes had an even bed of coal scattered over the firebox.

There was something strange and mysterious about the woods being on fire and it troubled Tim, who sought some solution as he swayed from tender to firebox and back to tender. Here it was, the spring of the year, and that patch of woods afire. A campfire started by tramps might have spread, but Tim doubted that thought. Sparks from a passing train might have been the cause but for some reason, perhaps just a newspaperman's intuition, he felt that there was something sinister behind the cause of the fire.

"Take it easy, we're almost in," shouted Henshaw as he pointed to the lights of Vinton as they swung around a curve.

Tim stuck his scoop into the coal pile and straightened up for the first time since he had taken the fireman's place.

The muscles in his back ached and his arms were sore, but he felt that he had earned his ride. His thoughts still on the fire, he stepped over to the engineer's side of the cab.

"Anything of special value on tonight?" he asked.

"Don't know for sure," replied Henshaw as he eased up on the throttle. "There

were rumors back at Atkinson that there was a lot of *specie* aboard for some coast bank. Never can tell but the mail usually has a pouch or two of valuable mail."

Tim was silent as Henshaw guided the mail through the maze of tracks that marked the east entrance of the yards at Vinton. Green and red lights blinked out of the night at them.

There was the hollow roar as they rumbled past long lines of freight cars on the sidings, the sharp exhaust of a laboring switch engine, the multiple lights of the roundhouse and finally the station itself loomed in the rays of their headlight.

At the far end of the big depot Tim could see another engine waiting to be hooked onto their train to continue the mail's dash for the coast.

Henshaw cracked his throttle just enough to bring them in with a flourish and stopped his scorched string of mail cars at the station on time to the second.

When Tim dropped out of the cab he was astounded to see Colonel Robert Searle, head of the state police, striding toward him.

"Hello, Murphy," said the officer,

"what's this I hear about you fellows running through a piece of burning timber?"

"That's right, Colonel," said Tim. "We struck a patch about forty miles down the line and it looked for a time like we weren't going to get through. Then Mr. Henshaw, the engineer, decided to run for it."

"You didn't waste much time when you first stopped for the fire did you?"

"Not any more than we had to," said the engineer. "The string of varnished cars was stepping on a fast schedule."

"Then that explains why there wasn't a million dollar robbery on this line tonight," said the head of the state police.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"MILLION dollar robbery!" exclaimed Tim and the engineer. "What do you mean?"

"Just this," explained Colonel Searle. "There's a million in cold cash back in one of those mail cars. We got a tip after you were out of Raleigh that there might be trouble and there isn't any question but that the timber was set afire in an attempt to stop the train. Whoever planned the robbery figured that the train crew would leave the train and go up for a closer view of the fire. When you decided to back up and run for it, you threw a monkey wrench into their plans. It must have been a small gang or they would have attempted to have stopped you even then."

"Our fireman is missing," put in Tim. "When we got the cinders out of our eyes after dashing through the fire we found Harry Benson gone."

"Maybe he was in with the gang," suggested Colonel Searle.

"Not Benson," said the engineer firmly.

"He's one of the most loyal men on the line. Only one thing could have happened to him. He lost his balance and fell out the gangway." Tears were in the engineman's eyes and they were silent for a moment.

Gray streaks of dawn were making their appearance on the eastern sky when Tim and the head of the state police left the mail train.

Railroad officials had indicated that they would start an investigation of the cause of the fire, but Colonel Searle informed Tim that he intended to make his own inquiry.

They were leaving the station when the fresh engine which had been coupled on the mail sounded the "high ball" and another engineer took up the race for the coast.

They went to a hotel were Ralph, who had just dressed, greeted them. He wanted to know all about the events of the night and Tim painted a vivid word picture of what had happened.

"We'll get something to eat," said Colonel Searle, "and then fly down the line and take a look at that timber patch."

"Do you think this may have something to do with the old Sky Hawk gang?" asked

Tim, giving voice to a thought that he had harbored for some time.

"Looks like one of their fiendishly clever jobs," admitted the colonel, "and it's just about time for them to start something."

Half an hour later they were at the Vinton airport, warming up the motor of the *Good News*. The sun was just turning the eastern sky into a warm, rosy dawn when Tim gave the motor a heavy throttle and sent the *Good News* winging off the field.

He swung the plane over Vinton, picked up the twin tracks of the Southwestern and headed back toward Atkinson. His hands, sore and bruised from handling the heavy scoop, ached as he held the controls of the plane. Unconsciously he compared the massive, brute power of the locomotive with the graceful, birdlike machine he was flying. Riding the cab of the mail had been an experience he would never forget but he was happy to be back in the clouds on the trail of what promised to be another sensational story.

The rails twisted and turned through the foothills and Tim marveled as he thought of the speed they had made with

the mail, wondered how they had ever stayed on the steel at the dizzying pace with which they had split the night.

The hills broadened out, wider valleys appeared and it was in one of these that they found the smouldering patch of timber which had been an inferno of flame and smoke only a few hours before.

Railroad section men had already gathered at the scene and Tim could see other gasoline handcars speeding down the rails. Ties would have to be replaced, new ballast put in and the rails tested to make sure that the heat had not warped them. Traffic on the system must not be held up a minute longer than necessary and the railroad men were rallying to the emergency.

Tim found a small meadow which was large enough for a landing. He fish-tailed the *Good News* into the field and set the plane down lightly. They lashed it with spare ropes which Tim carried in his own cockpit and then started for the railroad, a quarter of a mile away.

Blackened stumps of trees reared their heads into the gay sunlight of the spring morning, grim reminders of the near tragedy. Perhaps they were the only head-

stones Harry Benson would ever have, thought Tim, as he wondered if they would find any trace of the fireman.

A husky section boss told them to get out and stay out but Colonel Searle displayed his badge, which gave them access to anything they wanted to see.

The entire timber lot was not more than four or five acres in extent. It had been covered with a heavy growth of underbrush and with the drought of the year before it had been tender for any careless or intentional match.

Small patches of timber were still burning but along the railroad right-of-way the flames had either died down or had been smothered by section men beating at them with wet sacks.

"Find anything of the fireman?" Tim asked one of the workers.

"Sure," replied the railroad man, "he's up the line a couple hundred feet."

"Alive?"

"You bet. Got a broken leg but all right outside of that," grinned the man as he continued beating a sack at a stubborn blaze at the base of a stump.

Tim waited for no further question but

ran toward the far side of the timber lot where a group of railroad men had gathered. They were in a circle around someone on the ground. The flying reporter pushed them aside and looked down on the scorched, smoke-blackened features of Harry Benson. The fireman was in great pain from his broken leg, but he was making a brave attempt to smile.

"Hello, reporter," he said. The words were close clipped and came from lips tense with pain.

"Hello yourself," said Tim. "We thought you must have been thrown out into the fire after we missed you last night."

"Not me," said the fireman. "It was a close call but I didn't get anything more than a bad scorching. Who fired for the rest of the run?"

Tim held out his sore, cramped hands and the railroad men joined in the fireman's laugh.

"Laugh all you want to," smiled Tim, "but I kept that kettle of yours hot and Henshaw took her in on time."

"How did you happen to fall out of the cab?" asked Colonel Searle, who had joined the group around the fireman.

"I was trying to get one more shovel of coal into the old pot," said Benson. "I misjudged the distance and speed and was caught half way between cab and tender when we hit the fire. Figured I knew my way back to my side of the cab and made a jump for it. Instead of going where I intended I dove out the gangway. Good thing for me it only took us about five seconds to run that fire or I'd have plunged right into the center of it. I landed rolling, hit a rock and broke my leg and have been here ever since. Now we're waiting for a special that is coming down from Vinton with a doctor."

"Notice anything peculiar about the fire while you were lying here?" asked the officer.

"Only one thing," admitted the fireman. "It smelled kind of oily and the smoke was mighty dark but my leg was hurting so much I didn't pay a lot of attention to the fire except to worry for fear it might spread and I wouldn't be able to get out of the way."

"Did you hear any strange sounds?" asked Tim.

"Only once," replied the fireman.

"Sounded sort of like a high-powered car but when I didn't hear it again I thought I must have been going batty."

"Didn't see anyone?" asked the colonel.

"Not until some of these section hunkies came chugging down the line," said the fireman.

Satisfied that they could gain no additional information from questioning the fireman, Tim and Colonel Searle turned away and joined Ralph to start a systematic search of the blackened timber.

The two reporters and the head of the state police moved back and forth across the timber, searching for something that might indicate how the fire had started. They covered the section of timber on the right side of the railroad without result and then crossed over the rails and resumed their search on the left side.

For half an hour they combed the charred underbrush but without success and they met on the far side of the timber lot to discuss further plans.

"Slim pickings," commented the colonel. "I haven't found enough to hang on a toothpick."

"About all I've got is an idea," said Tim

as he started toward an old stream bed which cut through the valley. The colonel and Ralph, their curiosity aroused, followed the flying reporter.

The creek which ran through the valley had changed its channel a number of times and its old courses were filled with rubbish which the wind had deposited. It was in these old creek beds that Tim resumed his search. He had not been hunting five minutes when his cry brought the colonel and Ralph to his side.

Below them, hidden in the underbrush of the old channel, they saw half a dozen large tin containers.

"That's how your fire was started," said Tim. "Someone doused the timber with a generous supply of crude oil and how that stuff does burn."

They slid down the bank of the old creek bed and Tim and Ralph pulled one of the containers out where they could get a better view.

"Careful how you handle those," warned Colonel Searle, "and don't move more than one or two. I'll have a fingerprint expert out here to look them over. We may find a valuable story in the fingerprints if

the chaps who started the fire got careless."

"They're not the type to overlook any clues," said Tim.

"Not as a rule," conceded the colonel, "but you must remember they wouldn't have figured in the state police being in on this so soon. Believe me, it was a clever stunt of theirs setting fire to the woods and using that as a ruse to stop the mail. If it hadn't been for the determination of engineer Henshaw to get his train through on the new schedule on time, we'd have had something to really worry about this morning. If it had been a large gang they would have attempted to stop you anyway so it must have been a small, brainy outfit. Just the type of fellows the Sky Hawk used to have in his outfit."

There were no identifying marks on the containers and Tim and Ralph were careful not to disturb more than the one they had pulled into view.

The whistle of the special from Vinton sounded and when they climbed back to the level floor of the valley, they saw the stubby three car train grinding to a halt.

Behind the engine were two cars loaded with construction material, new rails and

ties and fresh ballast. The last car was a passenger coach which was disgorging half a hundred workmen. A doctor, nurse and several railroad officials also got off the rear car and hastened toward the injured fireman.

"Benson will soon be out of his agony," said Tim. "What a night he must have had, lying there with the flames all around and practically helpless because of his broken leg."

A telegraph operator who had come down on the special was busy shinning up a telegraph pole to cut in his instrument and place the scene of the fire in communication with the dispatcher and other points on the division.

"I'm going to have that fellow telegraph for our fingerprint expert to meet you at Atkinson," said the colonel. "You boys fly back home, write your stories, and bring him back. It will save hours over the best train connections he could make, and he may be able to read a surprising story if there are any fingerprints on these empty oil cans."

CHAPTER TWELVE

TIM and Ralph left the colonel and started for the *Good News*. On their way they passed over a small, level piece of ground. Two strange looking marks, about six feet apart and from thirty to forty feet long, attracted Tim's attention and he stopped to examine them.

"Trying to read 'footprints in the sands of time'?" asked Ralph.

"Not exactly footprints," grinned Tim, "but these marks didn't just get here. Someone made them and I'd like to know what for."

"They look like those made by airplane landing wheels," suggested Ralph, "but a plane couldn't land or take off in this short a space."

Tim studied the marks carefully and then proceeded toward the *Good News* without making any further comment on his discovery.

The flying reporters swung their plane around and Ralph blocked the wheels while Tim warmed up the motor. Then they

sped away toward Atkinson, leaving the charred and blackened remains of the timber behind them.

When they landed at their home field, the managing editor was waiting for them.

"What's this about an attempt at a million dollar robbery?" he demanded.

Tim and Ralph looked at each other blankly. They had not dreamed that the news might have preceded them for they thought the railroad people and the state police were trying to keep it under cover.

"How did you find out about it?" asked Ralph.

"A little birdie flew in and whispered in my ear," grinned the managing editor.

"The rumor is correct," admitted Tim. "Some gang set a patch of timber on fire last night in an attempt to stop the mail and get away with that shipment of money to the west coast. The only thing that averted the holdup was the quick action of the engineer in deciding to run through the fire and his speed in reversing his train and backing up a mile to make a run for it."

"It must have been a thrill riding in the cab when you shot through the flame and smoke," said Carson.

"Almost too much of a thrill," conceded Tim. "The fireman fell out of the cab and broke a leg. I finished firing on the run into Vinton and this morning they found the fireman lying along the right-of-way. He was suffering from shock. Lucky thing for him the fire didn't spread."

"Then you've plenty of material for a corking good yarn," exclaimed Carson. "Hop in the car and we'll head for the office."

Tim and Ralph told everything that had taken place and the managing editor became more enthused as their story progressed.

"You think it may be some members of the old Sky Hawk gang?" he asked.

"I've got a hunch that it is," said Tim.

"That will make a fine angle to bring into the story," said Carson.

"If I mention that we suspect any of the old gang, it will queer our chances of getting them," said Tim. "I'll write you a story every reader of the paper will find interesting but I don't want to give away whom we suspect. Those oil cans back there may have some fingerprints on them that will prove valuable clues.

The managing editor finally agreed to Tim's wishes and when they reached the *News* building Tim and Ralph went to their typewriters and started writing their stories.

Tim wrote the main story of the attempt to rob the train, making it vivid with glowing descriptions of the train's race through the flaming timber.

Ralph wrote the story of the investigation and then Tim dashed off a column about the fireman who, his leg broken, had laid along the right-of-way with the flames threatening to bring his death.

Both young reporters were alive to the excitement of the hour and they breathed their own interest into their stories. As a result the copy they placed on the managing editor's desk was brilliant, readable material of the kind that would make any managing editor's heart warm.

Carson read the stories with a quick eye, pencil poised to mark out errors. But he found none and when he had finished he leaned back in his swivel chair and smiled at Tim and Ralph.

"Another piece of fine work," he said. "Believe me, you boys can write."

"Stories like those don't have to be written," said Tim. "They write themselves."

Carson glanced at the clock. It was almost noon.

"Better get some lunch if you're going to fly the fingerprint expert back to the scene of the attempted robbery," he said.

"We won't have time to eat," said Ralph.

"You'll take time," ordered the managing editor. "After all the energy and brain power you've used in writing these stories you need to give your bodies food."

"Now this is an assignment. Go down to the Red Mill and order the biggest steaks they have in the house. Take at least forty-five minutes for your lunch and forget to pay the check as you leave. They'll put it on my account. Mind now, I want you to relax. Your minds will work much better after you've had something to eat."

The boys promised they would obey the managing editor's instructions and went to the Red Mill where they discussed the events of the preceding hours over thick, juicy steaks.

When the flying reporters returned to the airport, a thin, bespectacled young man

who carried a black brief case under one arm was waiting for them.

"I'm Charlie Collins, fingerprint man for the state police," he told them.

The flying reporters introduced themselves and then turned to the manager of the airport, who was standing nearby.

"Plane all ready to go?" asked Tim.

"Everything O. K.," replied Hunter, "And the sky's clear all the way. There's a tail wind that will help all the way."

"Faster the better," grinned Tim.

"How fast will you travel?" asked the fingerprint expert nervously.

"Oh, about two hundred," replied Tim.

"Two hundred miles an hour!"

"Sure," said Tim. "We can even do a little better than that if you're in such a hurry to get down there."

"I'm in a hurry all right," said Collins, "but not 'two hundred miles an hour' in a hurry. I've never been up before."

"You'll like it," said Ralph. "Greatest thrill you'll ever have."

"Will it bump and jump around badly?" asked the fingerprint expert.

"Rides smoother than a Pullman on a day like this," promised Tim.

"Well, since Colonel Searle ordered me to come down with you, I'll have to go," concluded Collins, "But I'd much rather make the trip by auto or by train."

"You'll like it once you're up," said Tim as he helped the suspicious one into the forward cockpit. Ralph buckled the safety belt on their passenger and then fastened his own.

Tim flipped the wings, waggled the stick, and they roared off the field.

When the wheels left the ground, the fingerprint expert let out a shriek that even Tim could hear above the motor but as soon as they were in the air, Collins' nerves settled and he started to enjoy his ride.

Tim shoved the throttle well ahead and their air speed climbed to one hundred eighty miles an hour. There were plenty of clouds in the sky but there was a ceiling of three thousand feet and Tim sent the *Good News* dancing along.

Almost before they knew it they were circling down to land in the field they had used earlier in the day.

Colonel Searle was waiting to greet them and he gave Charlie Collins a hand down from the forward cockpit.

"How did you like the ride?" Tim asked the fingerprint expert.

"I was scared stiff at the start," admitted Collins, "but after we were off the ground I enjoyed every minute of it."

"Thought you would," smiled Tim.

They staked down the *Good News* and then hurried across the railroad tracks and on to the old creek bed where they had found the empty oil containers.

Collins took charge of the investigation and Tim and Ralph sat down to watch him work. The fingerprint expert moved slowly and carefully, fearful lest he might blot out some print that would be valuable.

Every tin was examined and the fingerprints recorded and filed for comparison with the records at the headquarters of the state police.

"Anything that looks familiar?" asked Colonel Searle when Collins had finished his task.

"Can't be sure," replied the expert. "Some of them look like prints by the Sky Hawk's old crowd. I won't know for sure until I can get back to the records in the office."

Tim and Ralph looked at each other

significantly. Here was another mention of the Sky Hawk. The trail was getting warmer.

The railroad men had completed the work of repairing the right-of-way where it had been damaged by the fire and trains, delayed for hours, were on their way once more. Transcontinental limiteds and long strings of refrigerator cars were wheeling down the steel as fast as their engineers could roll them.

Colonel Searle decided to ride back to Vinton on one of the trains and requested Tim and Ralph to take Collins to Atkinson with them. This the flying reporters agreed to do and in less than ten minutes they were winging their way homeward, passing train after train which seemed to be little more than crawling along the twin ribbons of steel.

When they slid down out of the sky to a perfect three point the sun was far down in the west. Less than twenty-four hours had elapsed since Tim had climbed into the cab of the midnight mail at the union station but many things had happened in those few hours and more portended.

A car was waiting at the field to whisk

the fingerprint expert away, but before Collins left he promised to telephone the *News* office whatever secrets the fingerprints might unfold.

Tim and Ralph helped the mechanics wheel their plane into the hangar and then started for the city. They had dinner and then went to the *News* office to await whatever word there might be from the fingerprint expert.

The building was deserted except for a scrub-woman who was busy swishing her mop around the desks in the business office on the main floor.

Tim and Ralph walked up to the editorial office and switched on the lights over their desks. The telephones, which kept up an almost incessant clamor during the daytime, were silent, sulking on the desks. The electric printers which brought in the news of the world in never ending sheets of copy paper slept beneath their steel hoods. It was strange how quiet the plant could be at night. With the setting of the sun its life seemed to drain away, only to return again with the sunrise.

Tim worked on his aviation column for the next day while Ralph wrote a feature

on the speed with which the railroad crews had repaired the right-of-way damaged by the fire.

It was mid-evening before the telephone on Tim's desk rang. The summons were imperative.

Tim took the receiver off the hook and his hand shook. Ralph stopped work and came over to lean over his shoulder.

The call was from the headquarters of the state police. It was Collins, the finger-print expert, speaking.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE connection was poor and Tim was forced to call the operator and ask for a better wire. Finally they were able to hear Collins distinctly.

"I've checked up on the fingerprints," said the expert, "and they tally with those of Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard, two members of the old Sky Hawk gang!"

Tim's hand trembled as he heard the words. Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard were considered the two most dangerous members of the gang next to the Sky Hawk himself. The Hawk was gone but Sam and Pierre were carrying on for him.

Collins talked steadily for several minutes.

"Remember how you chased the Sky Hawk when he had the death ray?" he asked.

Tim replied in the affirmative.

"From all the dope I can get," said Collins, "Sam and Pierre were with the Hawk that night, one of them in the plane itself and the other waiting to help with the get-

away on the ground. Of course they'll have no scruples if you cross their path. In fact, they would probably go out of their way to meet you. Pleasant prospect, isn't it?"

"Not so pleasant," replied Tim, "for those chaps will stop at nothing."

The reputation of Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard was known to every police official in the central west. Petard had served in the Allied aviation forces during the war but he had later been revealed as a German spy and had thrown his lot with that of the Sky Hawk, former German war ace. Shanghai Sam came from the opposite end of the world, a white man who had been king of the crooks in the far east. When the middle west had offered a richer field he had not hesitated to transfer his activities and had joined the Sky Hawk and his band.

"Have you found any trace of either of them, except the fingerprints, near the scene of the attempted robbery?" asked Tim.

"I looked over the reports a few minutes ago," replied Collins, "and they must have vanished into thin air."

"I'm not so sure but what that's exactly what they did," said Tim as he thought of the queer marks he had found near the railroad right-of-way.

Collins warned them to be extremely careful of their movements for the next few days and then hung up.

"Well, what do you think of that?" asked Ralph.

"Just about what I expected," said Tim, "I was convinced that men trained under the Sky Hawk were behind the attempt. They are the only ones with the brains and the daring to have thought of such a way to stop the mail. The only thing that averted a million dollar robbery last night was the quick hand of engineer Henshaw and his decision to run through the fire."

"The railroad ought to retire him on a double pension," said Ralph.

"Don't think he'd want to retire," said Tim. "He's the kind who will stay at the throttle until he is too old to stand the strain of the high speed demanded today."

Their conversation turned to what might happen in the future and how best to protect themselves against Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard.

"Our best protection will be to keep on the alert," said Tim. "We'll keep our eyes open and our wits about us. In the morning we'll get some pictures of Sam and Pierre from the state police and become more familiar with their looks. They'll try another job in a few days and we'll want to be ready to cope with them in any emergency."

They left the office together and long after Tim had gone to bed he thought of the strange marks. They were connected in some important way, he felt, with Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard.

The next day Tim went to the public library where he spent the morning reading all that was available about Pierre Petard, the former war hero. There was nothing in the library about Pierre Petard the criminal. Tim also read voluminously about the development of airplanes and of the many freak planes that had been invented and of a few that had been made to fly. There was a growing conviction in his mind, but he was not yet prepared to divulge it even to Ralph. It was so simple that they might all laugh at him.

When Tim returned to the office, Cap-

tain Ned Raymond was talking to Ralph. The captain had pictures of Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard for the flying reporters to study.

"They'll try something else soon," asserted the state police official, "and we'll rely on you boys to help us in running them down. The railroad has offered a five thousand dollar reward and it will be yours if you bring about their capture."

"We'll do the best we can," promised Tim, "for the five thousand dollars would come in handy."

"Just two thousand five hundred dollars apiece," smiled Ralph. "What a lot of ice cream that would buy," he added.

Captain Raymond cautioned the flying reporters against taking any undue chances and warned them that the state police were without a single clue as to where Sam and Pierre were hiding.

"You'll never find them in Atkinson," said Tim.

"Why not?" asked the police official. "It's the largest city in this part of the state."

"They'll never hide in any city," said Tim. "When you find them it will be in

some isolated section of the state, perhaps in the valley of the Cedar."

"Have you any clues?" demanded Captain Raymond.

"Nary a clue," replied Tim, "but I've a hunch and I believe in playing hunches."

Captain Raymond was about to leave when one of the telephones on the copy desk rang. They heard the copy-reader who answered shout, "Bank Robbery!"

The words sent a chill of apprehension through Tim and Ralph. Tim had been convinced that the gangsters of the sky would strike again but he had not expected it would be within forty-eight hours after their failure to rob the million dollar train.

"What bank?" he cried.

"Citizens National," replied the copy-reader, who was busy writing a bulletin in longhand as the police reporter dictated the story.

"How much?" demanded Captain Raymond.

"One hundred and ten thousand in cold cash," said the copyreader.

"Let's go," said Tim, and they dashed for Captain Raymond's car, which was parked in front of the building.

In five minutes they were at the Citizens National Bank building, elbowing their way through the crowd which had gathered.

Their state police badges got them past the cordon of guards and they rushed into the lobby.

The robbery had been well planned and executed. The two bandits had entered the bank just before closing time and secreted themselves in a washroom. Just as the cashier was about to place the currency in the vault, they emerged and covered the employees with a sub-machine gun. One of them took the money, stuffing it in a brown leather portfolio. Then they slipped out a side entrance and into a waiting car. Twenty more seconds and they were lost in the heavy traffic.

A clerk had gathered his wits enough to obtain the license and a brief description of the car. It had been a black coupe, low and powerful, with license No. 52—621.

State police were scouring the highways but so far there had been no report of the car. Then came the news that the coupe had been stolen only a few hours before

in a village fifty miles away and toward the Cedar river.

When that news reached the bank, Tim determined to take up the chase in the *Good News* and fifteen minutes after leaving the bank the plane was soaring into the sky.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE flying reporters headed into the east toward the valley of the Cedar river.

Tim's mind was working rapidly. The robbery had all the signs of having been done by Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard. The smooth efficiency with which they had worked and the perfection of their escape pointed to the plans of men well versed in crime.

The *Good News* roared over the village from which the bandit car had last been reported and Tim swung the plane low. Excited residents pointed down a road that angled away to the right. Tim kept the *Good News* low and they sped along the country highway, every nerve tensed for some glimpse of the bandit machine.

They were not more than fifteen miles from the village and in a desolate part of the state when they saw smoke rising from the highway ahead of them.

With a startled cry Tim realized what had happened. The bandits' car had been wrecked and had then caught on fire. Even

though Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard were villains of the deepest dye, he had no desire to wish any man death under a flaming car.

The *Good News* circled slowly over the twisted, red-hot wreckage of the machine. There was no sign of life and Tim decided to attempt a landing in a small, level space nearby.

The pilot of the *Good News* brought his ship down in the field and made a quick stop.

Ralph, white-faced and shaking, turned to face Tim.

"Do you think they were caught in the wreckage?" he asked.

"Can't tell," replied Tim. "We'll have a look."

The reporters crashed through the underbrush along the road and came upon the smouldering remains of the car. They made a careful survey but could find no trace of anyone having been trapped under the machine.

"Don't tramp all over the road," Tim warned his companion. "There may be some footprints we'll want to follow. I've a hunch this burning car was nothing more

than a clever ruse to throw pursuers off the trail. We've wasted plenty of time landing and getting over here. In the meantime, the bandits are well on their way in some other kind of a machine."

"They didn't get away in a car," said Ralph. "Look at the road. There hasn't been a wagon or auto along since the light rain last night. They've taken to the brush."

We'll never find them in the brush," promised Tim. "They're too clever for that. A posse would smoke them out. We'll have a look around and see what we can find."

They discovered the footprints of two men but the marks looked as though someone had made a hasty attempt to cover them up. When the trail entered the brush the footprints were soon lost to view.

"We'll swing around the car in circles," said Tim. "In that way we ought to come upon their trail somewhere. Keep an eye on the direction it was headed when we lost it."

Ralph nodded and disappeared in the closely matted underbrush.

Tim could hear his companion's foot-

steps growing fainter and fainter until they could be heard no longer. The flying reporter moved carefully, eyes on the alert for any sign which might give him some clue on how the bandits had escaped after wrecking and setting fire to their machine.

He found what he was looking for in a small clearing in the underbrush. There were two parallel marks, spaced about six feet apart, and extending for thirty or forty feet. They were exactly like the marks which he had found near the scene of the attempted holdup of the midnight mail only a few days before.

Tim cupped his hands and called lustily for Ralph. An answering cry came for a distance and five minutes later Ralph threshed his way through the heavy scrub.

"Look at those," Tim cried exultantly. "Same thing we saw near the railroad right-of-way after they tried to hold up the mail train. When we find out what they mean and what they were made by we'll have the secret of these robberies."

"They look like they had been made by the wheels of an airplane," said Ralph, "but no plane could take off in such a short distance."

"How about an autogyro?" suggested Tim.

"Good heavens," exclaimed Ralph. "I'll bet you've got the solution."

"I only wish I had," smiled Tim, shaking his head. "When I first saw those marks the day after the burning of the timber along the railroad right-of-way I thought of an autogyro. When I looked up their capabilities I found that they wouldn't fit into the picture. No, Ralph, it's not an autogyro."

"But whatever makes those marks must help them to escape," said Ralph.

"We can only guess at that," Tim warned him. "Those marks might, just possibly, be coincidence and not be connected with the bandits."

"You'll never make me believe that," said Ralph.

"And I probably never will myself," conceded Tim, "but I'm not going to take anything for granted. We're up against something that is going to test our brains and our nerves to the utmost."

The young reporters continued their search but after half an hour had discovered nothing which would aid them.

"We'd better get back to our plane and report where we found the bandit car," said Tim.

"All right," agreed Ralph, "but before we do I want to take a final look at the wreck of their machine. It's cooled off somewhat and I'd like to look it over. There may be some marks on the body that will give us a clue."

The wind had been rising steadily and was whipping through the underbrush, whining a symphony all its own. Then the young reporters caught a sudden alarming smell of smoke and heard the crackling of flames.

"Someone must be near us," said Ralph. "I smell smoke and can hear a fire."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a sheet of flame, whipped by the angry wind, leaped into the air.

"The fire from the car has spread to the underbrush," cried Tim. "Quick, Ralph, or we'll be cut off from our plane."

In another second their danger was clearer. Some vagrant tongue of flame, gnawing at the woodwork of the car, had reached out and fired the underbrush. The shower of the preceding night had been

only enough to dampen the dust of the road and the brush and weeds were quickly devoured by the spreading flames.

Tim and Ralph raced through the underbrush, tearing their clothes to shreds as they crashed against stumps or fought their way out of tangles of briars. Their faces were scratched and bleeding but they did not stop. Their life depended on their legs and they used every ounce of their strength in the grim race against the fire.

The flames were roaring hungrily, advancing on them with a terrible certainty of purpose.

The reporters lungs ached cruelly as the boys plunged on, gasping for the breath that was needed to give them the strength to continue. The clearing in which they had left the *Good News* should be near at hand but still they crashed through the undergrowth. On and on they stumbled, the crackling of the flames spurring them to new effort.

"I'm all in," gasped Ralph as he dropped in a pitiful huddle. "Go on, Tim, go on! I'll make it out of here somehow."

"Get up, Ralph, get up!" cried Tim as he tugged at his companion's limp body.

"The fire," he screamed, "the fire! We can't stay here! We must go on!"

Ralph made a brave effort to get to his feet and with Tim supporting him stumbled on. Clouds of smoke billowed around them, filling their lungs, and waves of heat beat down upon them as the wind swept the fire nearer and nearer.

With cries of relief they staggered into the small, level place where they had left the *Good News*. The biplane was waiting for them, eager to sweep them up into the air and away from the fire.

The boys tumbled into their places and Tim snapped on the switches. The motor coughed once or twice and then roared into its sweet, even song of power.

There was no time to turn the plane around, no time to wonder if there was room to take off. There was only time for one thing; to jam the throttle wide open, send the *Good News* roaring down the wind and hope that she would lift clear of the brush when the time came.

Ralph snapped on his safety belt and Tim secured himself in his own cockpit. Then they were off, rocketing over the uneven ground as the plane gained speed.

The powerful motor shattered the heavens with its defiance of the flame and smoke billowing after and lifted the plane clear of the tangled underbrush which raised its arms in a futile effort to entangle the plane.

The boys filled their lungs with the clear, pure air of the upper regions as the *Good News* started on the return trip to Atkinson. Both Ralph and Tim were busy thinking of the recent events and of their discoveries at the scene of the wrecked car. They were thankful for their escape, narrow though it had been, from the brush fire.

When they landed at their home field Tim went straight to the administration building and telephoned news of the fire to the state conservation office where steps would be taken to send men to fight the flames.

After seeing that the *Good News* was properly cared for the boys returned to the *News* office.

Captain Raymond was waiting for them.

"What news?" he asked eagerly.

"Not very much," replied Tim. "They

got away. We found their car, wrecked and on fire, along a little used road. Thought they might have been caught in the wreckage and we landed nearby and went to have a look. It was only a ruse to throw us off the trail and slow up the chase. They might have had another car hidden nearby. At least we couldn't find any definite trace of them."

"I've checked up on the descriptions of the men who robbed the Citizens National," said the state policeman, "and I'm sure that Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard did the job. Find them and we'll rid the middle west of a real menace."

"Find them is right," said Ralph. "Looks to me like that is about the hardest thing anyone around here ever tackled."

"I think it is the hardest," said Captain Raymond grimly, as he got up to leave the office.

"Thanks a lot boys," he said. "Too bad you couldn't have been in the air sooner or you might have traced them from the time they left the city."

"That's an idea," said Tim. "We could arrange to have one or the other of us at the field all the time. When an

alarm comes in flash it to us there and the *Good News* could be in the air in less than five minutes."

"Good suggestion," said Captain Raymond. "I'll see Mr. Carson at once."

The lanky figure of the state officer disappeared into the managing editor's office and Tim and Ralph looked at each other and smiled.

"If Carson will agree to a plan like that, we'll get somewhere," promised Tim.

"Why didn't you tell him about the strange marks we found?" asked Ralph.

"Wouldn't do any good and besides I want to do a little private sleuthing of my own. We might just as well have that fat reward the railroad people have out. The bank may offer a sizeable sum and it won't be long until the capture of Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard will mean a small fortune."

Captain Raymond, accompanied by the managing editor, came into the editorial office.

"Boys," said Carson, "Captain Raymond believes one of you should stay at the airport all the time in case there are any more robberies. I agree with him and

we'll work out arrangements at once."

In less than an hour Tim was back at the airport where he explained his needs to the genial manager.

Hunter agreed to put an extra cot in the pilot's room and Tim sent into town for bed clothes and toilet articles he would need. It had been decided that Tim would take the night shift, sleeping at the field while Ralph would remain there during the day.

The reporters soon settled into the new routine. Hours lengthened into days and there was no further word of the gangsters who had robbed the Citizens National. It was as though the world had swallowed them.

The state police never relaxed their vigilance and extended their tenacles into every section of the state but without avail. No one seemed to know where Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard had gone after they had wrecked their car.

The spring days faded into those of early summer and Tim and Ralph were restless under the routine which kept them on such confining hours. They didn't dare venture away from the airport, yet both of

them had commenced to feel that their steady vigil was of little avail.

Tim continued to read avidly all of the aviation journals he could buy as well as spending considerable time looking into the files of old technical magazines and heavy volumes which he borrowed from the library.

Tim had returned to the field late in the afternoon to relieve Ralph and they were discussing plans for their summer vacation when the telephone rang.

Hunter summoned Tim.

The young reporter instantly recognized the voice of Captain Raymond, tense with excitement.

"Another robbery," he cried. "This time there is no mistake. It was Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard. They weren't even masked."

"Where was it?" cried Tim.

"At Hospers," shot back the captain. "They walked into the bank just before it closed, made the employes shut the doors right on time and then took an hour to thoroughly loot the institution. First reports indicate something over $50,000 in cash."

"They don't bother with chicken feed,"

exclaimed Tim. "What direction did they head?"

"Toward the river valley!" cried the captain. "My men are after them but you may be able to spot them from the air."

"We'll start at once," promised Tim.

Ralph, who had heard Tim's excited voice, was ready to go.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Hospers," replied Tim. "It's that little industrial town about fifteen miles northeast of here. Sam and Pierre just picked the bank clean and made a getaway. Captain Raymond's men are on their trail but maybe we can spot them from the air and force them to cover."

"Right," agreed Ralph. "Let's go."

Tim stopped only long enough to snatch a repeating rifle from a case on the wall of the field manager's office and then they were on their way.

The *Good News* was ready for them and Ralph climbed into the front cockpit. Tim handed the rifle up to him and then swung into his own place.

The motor roared into action, blasted the dust from under its wheels, and then flirted them across the field and into the air.

Tim opened the throttle and the air speed indicator went up to the one hundred ninety mile an hour mark. In almost no time they were over the town of Hospers and the red-roofed buildings which comprised its large farm machinery factory. On into the east they sped, high enough to get a commanding view of all the highways for miles around.

Tim figured that the robbers had started their escape less than half an hour before and they should sight the bandit car soon unless they had already taken to cover. Beneath them powerful touring cars, loaded with state troopers, were dashing madly along the highways but there was no sign of the machine they sought.

Tim and Ralph swept the countryside with eyes trained for the slightest unusual sign. They roared well ahead of the troopers and then swung in ever widening circles in their effort to find their quarry.

A cry from Ralph fixed Tim's attention on a small smudge along the road ahead. Something was on fire!

The *Good News* dropped out of the sky like an avenging eagle, motor whining and wires shrieking. The plane hurtled earth-

ward in a power dive that made the fuselage quiver and it was not until they were under the five hundred foot level that Tim brought the nose up and checked their mad descent.

Below them was the body of a wrecked automobile with flames licking at the cushions and woodwork.

"The fire's just started," cried Ralph. "They can't be far away."

Tim nodded and set the *Good News* down in a field a quarter of a mile back from the road.

"We may be able to get them this time," exulted Ralph as he leaped out of the front cockpit, rifle in hand.

"Don't see how they could be far away," admitted Tim. "The least we can do is take a look at that wrecked machine."

The boys broke into a fast trot and were soon at the edge of the road where the powerful touring car in which the bandits had made their escape had been ditched.

"Smells to me like they had taken some gasoline out of the tank and thrown it over the car," said Ralph.

Tim had been making a quick survey of the road. It was a graveled highway and

there were no footprints to give them a clue on which direction the robbers had fled.

"We'd better get back to the *Good News* and get into the air again," said Tim.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when they heard the motor of the *Good News* break into its familiar song.

"They've tricked us!" cried Tim. "They're stealing our own plane!"

The reporters plunged madly toward the field in which they had left their plane but before they had covered half the distance they saw the *Good News* shoot into the air.

Ralph and Tim, weeping with rage, watched their plane gain altitude and then circle over them.

The pilot leaned far out and waved derisively. Ralph's answer was to drop on one knee and send a stream of well directed bullets at the plane overhead.

They could see the bullets rip through the wings. Ralph, aiming at the propeller, was undershooting his mark. If he could land just one good shot in the whirling blade, it would disable the plane and bring the bandits back to earth.

Ralph exhausted the supply of ammuni-

tion in the magazine of his rifle and was helpless as the bandits headed the *Good News* in an easterly direction.

"What chumps we were, knowing they couldn't be far away, to leave the *Good News* unguarded," mourned Tim.

"We may have to hunt for new jobs when Carson hears of this," added Ralph.

"I'm not thinking of that so much as I am the humiliation," said Tim. "Here the state police feel that we are reliable and brainy enough to help them and then we go and pull a boner like this. I'll tell Carson what happened if you'll tell Captain Raymond and Colonel Searle."

"Here comes the captain now," said Ralph as a touring car, loaded with state police, skidded to a stop in the gravel.

"Get them?" cried Captain Raymond.

"They got us," said Tim. "We spotted their burning car and landed to have a look. While we were hunting around their wrecked machine they slipped behind us and stole the *Good News*. If you look east, you may see a speck against the clouds. That's the *Good News* and they're in it."

Captain Raymond stared incredulously at Tim.

"You mean to tell me you let them steal your plane?" he demanded.

"I'm afraid that's about right," put in Ralph. "We didn't exactly offer them the plane but they helped themselves anyway."

Captain Raymond broke into a hearty laugh, but stopped abruptly as he saw the expressions on the faces of Tim and Ralph.

"You wouldn't blame me for laughing," he said, "if you could have seen the woe-begone looks on your faces just now. Come on, cheer up. They pulled a fast one on you this time but they won't do it again. We were pretty close this time; next time we'll be close enough so we can land them in jail. Pile into the car, boys and we'll swing further east, picking up what information we can on the direction in which they are heading.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TWENTY-FIVE miles east of the place where the bandits had stolen the *Good News* Tim, Ralph and the state police came upon the crumpled remains of the plane.

From all indications the bandits had landed safely, then opened the throttle and sent the *Good News* charging into a clump of trees. The wings of the crimson plane had folded back along the fuselage, the propeller was splintered into a thousand bits and it was generally ready for the scrap heap.

Tim went wild with rage and wept in his futile anger. When he finally calmed down it was with a quietness that forboded no good for Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard.

"We can't learn anything more by inspecting what's left of the *Good News*," he said. "Let's circle around and see if we can find trace of a car they might have had waiting for them to make their getaway."

Captain Raymond agreed that Tim's suggestion was a good one and the state police spread out in their search for clues.

Tim and Ralph, working together, found the only clue of the afternoon. Half a mile beyond the wreckage of the *Good News* they found two marks, about six feet apart and nearly forty feet long, in a small field which was hidden from the nearest road by a heavy growth of trees. Tim made a careful inspection of the marks.

"That settles it," he said finally. "I'm going east tonight and when I come back we'll make it hot for the fellows who stole the *Good News* and then deliberately crashed it."

When they returned to Atkinson, Tim carried his story to the managing editor and Carson was wrathfully indignant. He had no word of censure for his flying reporters. Instead, he praised them for their daring and urged them to new efforts in the detection of Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard.

"I'm playing a long hunch," said Tim, "but I feel that if I can go east tonight, I'll be able to learn information there that will bring about the arrest of this pair of air pirates."

"Go as far as you like, Tim," said the managing editor, "just as long as you deliver the goods."

"Thanks, Mr. Carson. I'll leave on the early night train for New York."

Ralph helped Tim throw a few things in a traveling bag and saw his flying companion to the union station and aboard the limited which would carry him on his quest for new clues.

"What's clicking in the old bean?" Ralph asked as they stood beside the Pullman.

"Just a wild hunch," said Tim, "and I don't want to be laughed at if it goes wrong. That's why I'm keeping it under my hat. If there is anything to it, you'll be the first to find out. And say, while I'm away, beg a plane off Carl Hunter and have it ready when I return. We may need a ship in a hurry. We've done plenty of favors for Carl and he'll be glad to help us out."

"I'll have a ship ready before you're back," promised Ralph as Tim swung up on the steps of the slowly moving train. "Good luck."

The limited picked up speed and its tail lights vanished as Ralph stood on the plat-

form, wondering what queer mission had taken Tim east so suddenly.

Thirty-six hours after leaving Atkinson Tim awoke to find his train pulling into the outskirts of New York. The steam locomotive was uncoupled from the long string of Pullmans and an electric engine took its place at the head of the train for the few remaining miles into the heart of the city. The train picked up speed rapidly and rolled steadily into Manhattan, hesitating only a moment before it plunged into the darkness of the tunnel under the river. Then they were in the great terminal, where trains were arriving or departing continuously throughout the day.

Tim went to a hotel the managing editor had recommended and after leaving his traveling bag set forth in quest of the information which he felt would result in the apprehension of Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard and put an end to the series of crimes which they had carried out successfully in the middle west.

The flying reporter's first call was at the office of the largest aircraft manufacturer in the United States. After some insistence he was admitted to the office of

Herman Bauer, the chief designer, a quiet, gray-haired man. In a few words Tim explained his mission.

"I'm glad you came to us," said Bauer. "I've been reading of these robberies and once or twice the stories have mentioned how completely the bandits disappear and that the only marks they leave behind are those parallel lines in small clearings."

"Then you've guessed what they must be using?" asked Tim eagerly.

"Yes," assented Bauer, "but I'm afraid I can't help you much more than to say that I believe you're on the right track. Our company doesn't go in for that sort of thing and if we did we'd have to have assurance that the machine would be used legally."

"I hardly expected that your firm was involved in any way," explained Tim, "but with your knowledge of the companies capable of doing such a job I thought you might be able to give me some valuable leaders."

"I can't off hand," replied the designer, "but if you'll come back this afternoon I'll make some inquiries in the meantime and may have information that will help you."

Tim thanked the aviation expert and

passed the remaining hours of the morning walking through the streets of busy, restless New York.

At two o'clock he returned to Herman Bauer's office. The designer greeted Tim cordially and turned to introduce a younger man who was in his office.

"I want you to know Mac Giddings," he told Tim. "Mac is one of my assistants and has managed to uncover some information that should help you."

Tim and the assistant designer shook hands cordially. They were of the same type, tall and slender, with a seriousness of purpose that brought an immediate and warm friendship.

"I've heard rumors for some time that a little company back in the Jersey mountains was up to some kind of a trick that wasn't altogether above board," said Giddings. "One of our draughtsmen was fired by them but before he left he saw enough of the plans to see what they had in mind. If you say the word, we'll hop in my car and drive out. We can make it before sundown."

Tim agreed to the assistant designer's suggestion and they were soon threading

their way through the heavy mid-afternoon traffic. Once out of the heart of the city they struck a thoroughfare and sped across the Jersey flats.

The flying reporter told his new friend of their experiences with Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard and gave him an outline of his own conclusions.

"Seems to me you've found the solution," said Giddings as he swung his machine off the main highway. "And I wouldn't be surprised if we verify it within the next two or three hours."

The roads became rougher and their car labored up steep grades. Farm houses looked less prosperous and by six o'clock they had reached a section of Jersey with which few people were familiar. They were almost to the Pennsylvania line in a wild, sparsely settled region.

"We'd better leave my car here," said Giddings, "and go the rest of the way on foot."

He drove his car behind a thicket that screened it from the view of any chance passerby and they continued their journey afoot.

Half an hour later they topped a ridge

and looked down on a valley, flanked on each side by small clearings. To the right of the creek were several frame houses while on the left side was a wide, low building, half frame, half canvas, which could be nothing but a hangar.

"Take it easy," cautioned Giddings. "These people don't like strangers and they're apt to shoot first and ask questions afterwards."

Tim and the assistant designer made their way toward the clearings with great caution. Fortunately they were on the left bank of the stream and would not have to cross it in order to reach the hangar.

A small crew of mechanics who had been at work in the hangar came out of the building and made their way across the rough bridge and to one of the houses which evidently was used as a mess house.

"Now's our chance," whispered Giddings as he moved toward the hangar.

"You don't need to go," said Tim, grabbing at his companion. "There is no need for you to take any chances. This is my game and I can see it through now."

"I've voted myself in on it," said Giddings. "Let's go."

They moved quietly through the underbrush and made their way toward the rear of the hangar. There they stopped and listened to make sure that no one had been left on guard.

"All clear," whispered Tim. "I'm going in."

The flying reporter found a place where he could wiggle under the canvas wall at the rear of the hangar. Giddings was right behind him and when they stood up it was to look upon the most unusual workshop either of them had ever seen.

Workbenches and lathes were along the walls of the makeshift hangar but the object which held their attention was the monoplane in the center.

"I'm right!" exclaimed Tim jubilantly, "I'm right!"

"You sure are," agreed Giddings. "I'm going to have a look at this contraption."

The monoplane was the strangest plane either of them had ever seen. They pinched themselves to make sure that they were not dreaming for it was such a bizarre looking craft.

"Old Man Bauer will have a fit when he hears about this," chuckled Giddings, "for

he has always had a pet theory that this type of machine would never fly. Said you couldn't get enough power into the wing propellers."

"I'd like to try it," said Tim as they started a quick inspection of the monoplane.

The machine had been camouflaged by an expert. On the ground it would have been invisible from the air while in the air it would be practically invisible from the ground, so cleverly had the colors been mixed and camouflage been applied. But the feature of the monoplane which drew their attention was the wing propellers. At the outer tip of each wing were mounted horizontal propellers, each about four feet in diameter. Small, powerful air cooled motors supplied the power for the wing propellers while a standard whirlwind was the motive power for the main propeller in the nose of the ship.

"Talk about autogyros," exclaimed Tim. "Why this thing could take off and land in a flower bed. I'll bet those wing propellers can pull it almost straight up."

"That's the theory," said Giddings, "and from the robberies that this gang you're

after has been getting away with successfully it looks to me like they've been using one of these machines, probably the first one this outfit ever turned out."

"When I first saw those parallel tracks after the attempt to rob the midnight mail I figured they must be using some kind of a machine like this," said Tim, "but I knew it would have to be more efficient than anything sold on the commercial market."

"Let's get out of here before dark," said Giddings. "We've got a long trip back to the city and we can discuss plans on our way back."

Tim agreed and they made their way out of the hangar and back to the car without detection.

On the trip to New York Tim discussed plans for the capture of Shanghai Sam and Pierre Petard with the young aircraft designer.

"I've got something I've been fooling with for a long time," said Giddings. "It's a sort of radio detector designed for use in time of war. When it is fitted into a plane you can ascertain whether any other ships are in the air and by adjustment of the detector tell how far away they are."

"Just the thing I'll need," said Tim enthusiastically. "Is there any chance that you'll lend it to me for a few days?"

"That's why I mentioned it," said Giddings. "The device needs a thorough testing and once I've proved its value I'll have no trouble in selling my patents. We'll both profit by your using it."

When they reached the city Giddings drove to his apartment, which contained living quarters and a room which he had fitted up as an electrical laboratory.

Far into the night they worked in the laboratory, Giddings explaining the use of his radio detector and Tim working with it to be sure that he could handle it to the best advantage.

When the flying reporter left Giddings' apartment he was burdened with the radio detector, which, although placed in a compact cabinet, was heavy.

"I'm going to report this outfit over in the Jersey woods," said Giddings, "and it won't take Uncle Sam long to put a damper on their activities. There will be no objection to their manufacture of their plane for commercial use but to make them especially for aerial bandits is a proposition that Uncle Sam won't stand for."

"I'm glad you'll take care of that," said Tim. "They really have a wonderful plane and it's a shame that a crooked outfit has gotten hold of it. Undoubtedly money which the Sky Hawk obtained when he was at the peak of his career is behind them."

"Which will be just one more reason why Uncle Sam will be glad to shut them up," said Giddings. "By tomorrow afternoon the woods will be full of federal men for a surprise raid. Be sure and let me know how you come out and send the radio detector back as soon as you're through."

"I'll do that," promised Tim, "and thanks so much for all you've done for me."

When the flying reporter reached his hotel, he found a telegram.

"We've been trying to find you since late afternoon," said the clerk who handed him the message. "It was marked important."

Tim tore open the yellow envelope and read the brief message. His senses reeled as the import of the telegram flashed through his mind.

Ralph had been kidnapped!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE message, from the managing editor of the *News*, was brief and to the point.

"Ralph kidnapped this afternoon. Come home."

The shocking news paralyzed Tim's brain and he leaned helplessly against the clerk's desk, his face drained of all color.

"Are you ill?" asked the clerk.

"No, I'll be all right in a minute," Tim managed to say. "Just some surprising news from my managing editor."

The flying reporter went to a nearby lounge and sat down.

Ralph kidnapped.

It must be impossible; it was impossible, he told himself. Yet there was the telegram from Carson—so simple and yet so startling.

"Ralph kidnapped this afternoon. Come home."

They needed him in Atkinson and Tim pulled himself together and went to the desk to inquire about the air passenger service west.

"You can get a plane at seven in the morning," said the clerk. "By changing at Dearborn you'll land at Atkinson at five in the afternoon."

"Telephone my reservation," said Tim and he turned to hasten to his room.

He partially undressed and threw himself on the bed, still dazed from the shock of the telegram.

What could Ralph have been doing; what had he run into that had resulted in his kidnapping? Who would want to kidnap him and how had they done it? These and a dozen other questions raced through Tim's tired mind. Finally, in complete physical and mental exhaustion, he dropped into a sound sleep.

Afternoon of the following day found Tim disembarking from the mail and passenger plane at his home airport. Carson and the field manager were waiting to greet him.

"What's this about Ralph being kidnapped?" demanded Tim, to whom the hundred and ten mile an hour schedule of the passenger plane had seemed slow as they winged their way westward from New York.

"There isn't a whole lot to tell," said the managing editor. "The day after you left Ralph took one of the cars and headed for Cedar river valley. Said he had a hunch that the bandits had a hideout there and that he might improve his time while you were away by making a sort of a lone search for them. He was still boiling mad over their stealing the *Good News* and cracking it up."

"I feel that way myself," said Tim. "Go on."

"Ralph never got to the valley," said Carson. "In fact, he didn't get more than fifty miles from Atkinson. The first we knew he was in trouble was a report late in the afternoon of one of our cars being found abandoned on a road east of here and on the way to the valley I knew it was the machine Ralph had taken and personally headed the investigation."

"What did you find?" asked Tim breathlessly.

"Signs of a hard scrap," said the managing editor. "Ralph must have stumbled on Sam and Pierre or they might have been trailing him. It was along a lonely road with lots of underbrush nearby."

"Anything to show that Ralph was hurt?"

"There were severel bullet marks in the body of the car but there was no sign of blood," said the managing editor.

"Find anything else?"

"Some peculiar marks in a clearing nearby. They were similar to those you reported at railroad fire and bank robbery."

"I was sure those marks would be there," mused Tim. "Well, one thing sure," he added, "Sam and Pierre are about at the end of their string. I know what they've been using to make their escapes and have the means of detecting them the next time they come into the open."

Tim told Carson and Hunter of his visit to the aircraft company in New York and how the chief designer and Mac Giddings had helped him, of the discovery of the secret airplane factory in the Jersey woods and of the marvelous plane that they had developed. Then he explained the radio detector which Mac Giddings had perfected and his plan for catching Shanghai Sam and his companion.

"It sounds O. K.," said the managing editor enthusiastically.

"I've got a plane here at the field you can equip," volunteered the field manager. "I'll have the mechanics start getting it in shape."

Throughout the night Tim remained at the airport, supervising the installation of the radio detector in the fast biplane which Hunter provided for his use.

By dawn the plane was ready to go.

"What are you going to do now?" asked the managing editor.

"Start a steady patrol of the Cedar river valley," said Tim. "When I get tired Hunter has agreed to relieve me. We'll both ride the plane and only come down when we need gas and oil."

"Won't they get suspicious of what you're up to?" asked the managing editor.

"I doubt it," said Tim. "We'll be up ten to twelve thousand feet all the time and with the muffler Carson has fitted on the exhaust they won't be able to see or hear us on the ground."

"And will the radio detector work at that height?"

"Giddings said it was good up to twenty thousand feet," replied Tim. "At least it is the best we have and if it does work

we'll soon put an end to these marauders."

An hour later the silver-gray biplane which they had equipped was cruising over the Cedar river valley. The altimeter showed 10,000 feet and Tim throttled down the engine as he started the patrol of the valley. Hunter, in the forward cockpit, had a headset on and was listening for some sound in the radio detector.

Through the hours of the morning they maintained their vigil and at noon flew halfway back to Atkinson to land at an air mail emergency field and refill their gasoline tanks.

"I'll take the controls this afternoon," said Hunter, and Tim agreed to the suggestion.

When they were near the valley again Tim set the radio detector going. There was a low, steady hum in the earphones for the noise of their own motor was cut out of the set's pickup.

At two o'clock a sound came through the earphones that electrified Tim. Hunter, in the rear cockpit, could see Tim's body tense as the flying reporter bent over the detector and adjusted the dials for more delicate tuning.

Somewhere below them the motor of a powerful plane was being warmed up!

The roaring in the earphones was strong, then weak, as their own biplane swung away from the source of the sound. By following the path of the strongest sound they would be able to find their quarry and Hunter watched Tim's hand carefully for directions on how to pilot the plane.

When they reached the center of a dense forest along the right bank of the Cedar the roaring was loud and steady. They were still up eight thousand feet and too high to see what was going on below. Tim took a pair of field glasses out of a case and leaned over the side of the ship while Hunter banked the biplane in easy circles.

The powerful lense made the ground leap toward them and Tim could see every object clearly. He gasped as his glasses focused on a clearing in one of the densest parts of the forest.

He was looking down on an exact replica of the plane he had seen in the makeshift hangar in the Jersey woods only two days before. The upper wings, as he had expected, were carefully painted so that detection from the sky was almost impossible.

Under normal conditions Tim and Hunter could have flown low over the clearing without seeing the plane but thanks to the radio detector they had been able to spot it with little trouble.

Hunter shut off the motor and leaned toward Tim.

"What are they doing?" he cried.

"Getting ready to take off," shouted Tim. "They're climbing into the plane. Here they come!"

"See anything of Ralph?"

"No, but there's a small shack on one side of the clearing and he is probably in there. We'll take care of these chaps first and then drop down and see where they've hidden Ralph."

Hunter snapped on the switch and the motor roared into action again.

Tim kept his glasses trained on the plane below. The wing motors had been started and the ship, after a run of thirty or forty feet, was rising almost vertically. It was a beautiful take-off and Tim knew that the master hand of Pierre Petard was at the controls.

"We'll let them get out of the forest country," Tim shouted at Hunter. "If we

swoop down on them now we'll have them sneaking into some small clearing where we can't follow."

"Right," cried Hunter as he swung his biplane westward and took up the pursuit.

For half an hour the strange game of hunted and hunter continued with Tim and Hunter keeping five to six thousand feet above the other ship.

When they were finally over open country Tim motioned for Hunter to give his plane the gun and the field manager, anxious for action, opened the throttle and sent his ship thundering downward.

Tim opened a black leather case in the forward cockpit and swung a sub-machine gun over the side of the plane. They had come prepared for any emergency for both of them realized that the men they sought would stop at nothing to make their escape.

The biplane shrieked down on its unsuspecting quarry, flashing out of the heavens like an avenging eagle.

Intuition must have caused Pierre Petard to glance over his shoulder just in time to see Hunter preparing for the final swoop. They saw Pierre reach quickly and tap Sam on the shoulder.

Instantly the man in the forward cockpit turned and in another second a light machine gun, similar to the one Tim held, belched a stream of bullets at them.

Sam's aim was good and the bullets traced a wicked line along one wing, coming ever closer to the fuselage. But it was for only a second.

Hunter was a master of the air and he sent his plane into a screaming dive that ended only when he was under the other plane and in a position for Tim to pour a hail of bullets into the fuselage of the ship above them.

The bandit plane veered sharply and for a second Tim had a clear shot at the propeller. The bullets from the machine gun shattered the whirling blade and the air was full of bits of wood.

Hunter pulled his own ship into the clear and they watched anxiously while Pierre attempted to bring his damaged plane to a safe landing. It fluttered down like a crippled bird, turning this way and that, now limping along for a few feet and then abruptly dropping away until it seemed inevitable that it should end in a deadly tailspin.

"They'll make it all right," cried Tim. "They're heading for that big pasture," and he pointed to a large field.

Hunter gave the biplane full throttle and sped earthward at a daredevil pace. They must beat the bandit ship down. The field manager sideslipped into the pasture and set his plane down hard. Tim leaped from the cockpit, his machine gun freshly loaded and ready for action. Hunter, a repeating rifle in hand, joined him.

The bandit plane was staggering down toward the field. It barely cleared the fence and bounced toward them.

"Get back of this ridge," Tim warned Hunter. "They may try to shoot it out and we'd make good targets out here in the open."

Hunter agreed and they sought shelter behind a low ridge along the edge of the field.

The bandit plane rolled on and on. They could see Pierre working desperately at the controls.

"The wing motors," cried Tim. "He's trying to start them. If he does they'll get away from us."

"Keep down," warned Hunter, "I think

the burst of bullets you put into their ship disabled the controls to the wing motors or he'd have used them before he landed."

The bandit plane finally rolled to a stop less than two hundred feet away.

"Come out with your hands up!" ordered Tim.

The answer was a flicker of flame from the forward cockpit, the staccato of a machine gun and the thud of bullets into the dirt which protected them.

Tim answered instantly, his machine gun tracing a steady, deadly line along the fuselage. Hunter pumped shell after shell into his repeating rifle.

The firing from the plane ceased abruptly.

"We'll come out," cried a weak voice and Pierre Petard stood up in his cockpit.

Tim and Hunter moved forward cautiously, fearing a ruse, but they found that Shanghai Sam had been wounded in the shoulder in the last exchange of shots and Pierre, knowing that the end of his career was near, was white and shaken.

"Where is the reporter you kidnapped?" demanded Tim.

"Back in the clearing where we made

our headquarters," replied Pierre. "We didn't harm him," he added as though fearing Tim might manhandle him.

"If he is," promised the flying reporter, "I'll give you something to remember me by."

Shanghai Sam refused to talk and Hunter went to the nearest highway where he stopped a motorist. Within an hour Captain Raymond and a detail of state police were on the scene, ready to take charge of the prisoners.

Tim, relieved of the responsibility of capturing the sky pirates, hastened to a farmhouse where he telephoned the story to the *News*. Carson, the managing editor, was jubilant.

"But how about Ralph?" he asked.

"State police are on their way to get him now," said Tim. "The whole case will be cleaned up in another hour or two."

"Splendid," exclaimed the managing editor. "We're going on the street with an extra now with the *News* taking full credit for the capture of those fellows."

Early that evening Tim and Ralph were reunited in the *News* office. They had much to tell and they had an interested

audience in their managing editor, the field manager and the members of the *News* staff.

Ralph told how he had been on his way to the Cedar river valley when he had seen the bandits bring their plane down in a small clearing near the highway. Ralph had left his car to make a closer inspection but had been discovered by Pierre and Sam. He had fled to his car but had been captured before he could make his escape. He had been forced into the bandit plane and taken to their hiding place in the wilderness of timber and underbrush in the river valley.

"They took good care of me," grinned Ralph, "but I realized that when they completed their series of daring robberies they would probably leave me tied up in the shack, which wasn't such a pleasant prospect. The money they had obtained in their robberies was all in the shack and believe me I was sure happy when the state police arrived."

From New York came a telegram from Mac Giddings congratulating Tim on the use of the radio detector and adding that federal agents had raided the hidden

factory in the Jersey woods, seizing all men and equipment. Giddings added that his own company was making arrangements to take over the plans and manufacture the new plane on a commercial basis.

"At least some good will come from this whole affair," said Tim. "The plane was truly a marvel. It's too bad that it had to have its first test in this fashion."

Captain Raymond made his way into the room. A stranger was with him but Tim recognized the man as the chief executive of the state, Gov. Ned Turner.

Captain Raymond introduced Tim and Ralph to the governor.

"When Captain Raymond told me all of the fine things you two have done in capturing these sky pirates I wanted to tell you in person how much this means to the state. It is a real privilege to commission you as honorary life members of the state police."

When Tim and Ralph were finally alone with their managing editor, they confessed their extreme fatigue.

"What you need is a good rest," said Carson. "You'll get the $5,000 reward the railroad offered, the banks should pay

you handsomely and the paper is going to give each of you a bonus of a month's pay. You'd better take a vacation and spend a little of that money."

"Sounds good to me," said Tim. "What do you say to accepting the invitation Hank Cummins extended to visit at the Circle Four ranch for a month?"

"Make it unanimous," smiled Ralph.

"Then you can plan on leaving the first part of the week," said the managing editor. "In the meantime we'll see about buying a plane to replace the *Good News* for I know neither of you will be happy until then."